

## Chapter 5

### Malc Kent: The Early Years (Part 2 of 2)

Around the time that orienteering was fading, climbing was becoming my obsession. It started out initially like many pursuits for me, as a purely competitive endeavour. My school friend Rhys needed a climbing partner so that he could climb more, and each week kept hounding me about joining him. Although I had been climbing to that point the amount I was doing was nothing compared to Rhys, who was already a member of the local mountaineering club and was climbing multiple times a week. He'd even cunningly figured out that there was a tiny climbing wall in the sports centre directly behind the school, and had accidentally forgotten to mention it to any of us as he slipped off for secret lunchtime training sessions. When I eventually succumbed to the constant pitching from him, for me it was more about beating Rhys than actually climbing.

But one thing quickly led to another, and within just a few weeks I found myself also going climbing multiple times a week. I joined the mountaineering club with Rhys, and we became its youngest members by far as well as its most motivated. We also became members of the nearest "proper" climbing gym (just a "short" one-hour hard cycle ride from my home!). While out-climbing Rhys every time was my top priority, I quickly began to love the gymnastics of the sport and the proprioceptive stimulus that came from moving artistically and efficiently over vertical terrain. I realized that I had found a sport that naturally suited me, both physically and mentally.

After six months, both mine and Rhys's drive to climb more and more must have become quite noticeable to others around us. We had both joined the local scout group just so we could gain access to their outdoor climbing tower. When we kept requesting that all scout evenings should be climbing nights, the scout leaders became sufficiently fed up enough with us to just quietly give us the keys to the gate and the kit store. I honestly don't really remember ever turning up to a single legit scouting event or ever wearing the uniform, but, man, did our scout group have the best climbing team! We could have literally out-climbed any other scout group with our legs tied together.



I had a natural love of danger and risk at that time, which I appeared to have inherited from my father, who had raced motorbikes domestically and internationally for much of his life, surviving various incidents and the Isle of Man, ensuring he was in one piece when I entered the world. My dad was a natural adventurer and explorer. He had met my mum while they were both working in Kenya at the same company.

They weren't initially very enamoured with one another, as my dad would complain about his wages and demand to see my mum (who worked as the company's all-encompassing head of HR at the time), who would duly tell her staff to keep the office door closed and not let him in. But I guess it couldn't have been a more poetic turnaround than when my mum found my dad lying in a ditch one morning, trapped under his motorbike after a freak road accident, and took him to hospital and essentially saved his life.



But Dad wasn't in fact the first in the line, if you like. His dad was even more of an adventurer and explorer. My grandfather, as I found out many years later, was also an avid climber and would ride all over Britain with his friends in the 1930s to rock climb with very limited and archaic climbing equipment that belonged in a museum – a sense of uncompromising need for exploration that even astounds me today. Beyond Granddad, the extended family tree on my dad's side illustrates a pretty long history of adventurers dating back to a series of known and respected knights in the 11th and 12th centuries. Clearly the tendency for lives lived full of novel and intense experiences was nothing new.

And so what I found in climbing was a sport that encouraged and rewarded my on-the-spot initiative, absolute accountability for my actions and my love of intense experiences. It also triggered a state of consciousness in me that people now generally refer to as “flow state,” when the brain resonates at a particular frequency and certain parts of the brain go quiet and you feel the ultimate immersion and clarity and connection with where you are and what you are doing at that time. For me this was a brilliant way of managing my hyperactivity and focusing my energy.

### **Flow State**

In human performance the brain shows itself again and again to be the master controller, the axis around which other body parts function. On the mental side of the brain's purpose, decades, even centuries, of study have shown that we can exist in any given moment in different states of consciousness, some of which are termed “higher states of consciousness.” One these is called “flow state.” And in sports it is believed today that this is the optimal brain state for the majority of the demands that athletes need to meet to be at their best.

Attaining flow state requires trigger events or conditions, and certain circumstances can produce the heightened awareness that gets athletes into flow state quickly and keeps them there. This is what high-objective danger sports like climbing do. They encourage flow state to occur by providing the necessary task challenge and the imperative risk-related motivation in high quantity.

But while adventure sports are the clichéd laboratories for flow state researchers, running too can benefit from flow state condition. In flow the brain is able to conduct muscular movements faster and more efficiently and with better coordination. In running this can mean being smoother and more efficient in how you cover the ground. In 2017 I had the great pleasure of asking questions to Eliud Kipchoge soon after he attempted to break the two-hour marathon barrier. He was able to confirm my suspicion that towards the end of the event he felt he was locked in flow state. This was clear, as we could see from some distance that he was operating at the limits of running efficiency.



Again, just to paint the picture of how I approached things at the age of 16, I'll very quickly explain a typical Sunday climbing trip. Because I lived in the southeast of England there wasn't a huge amount of natural rock to climb on. Very little, to be honest. In fact, the nearest rocks were theoretically an hour away by train. So, to begin with, I would ride my bike for ten minutes to the train station, then I'd catch two trains with a platform connection in between and then I'd cycle 30 minutes up and down hills and along narrow country roads to eventually arrive at the Crag.

However, after a while I convinced myself that the train was too inefficient and not direct enough for my liking and that cycling all the way was absolutely possible. So then the journey evolved into an intense, 90-minute cycle ride up and down numerous big hills, on roads of all sizes, with a heavy climbing pack on my back. And, as you can imagine, coming back was just the same in reverse but with the aid of a bike light and some blind faith. And, sandwiched in between all of this, was 4–6 hours of climbing at the Crag, trying to beat Rhys on every route.

So I guess in some ways it was no surprise that, during my time after school, training as a pilot in the air force, I would always get up at six o'clock in the morning and run around the RAF station for an hour like a nutter. I found out pretty quickly that burning off this little bit of extra energy would settle me down just perfectly in order to be focused and calm during the day's training. Although I had always loved flying, from my very first RAF instructor-led flight in a Chipmunk at the age of 12, the military lifestyle just didn't give me the degree of freedom that I was craving. I often found myself being the odd one out during flying courses and socials and clearly had a different approach to life than my peers. So it was no surprise that I later began to separate from the idea of joining the air force and decided that I wanted to go to university and get a higher level of education.

That said, I have always looked back fondly at my experiences with the RAF and the great lessons I learned. At school I was very lucky to be immersed in a culture of high performance where students like

myself were constantly pushed to see how far they could go. On moving to the air force I felt it was a natural progression to the next level of high-performance culture, where again it was about being pushed to see what you could do. The relentless competition, the steep learning curves and the application of positive stressors married well with my own internal need to drive myself forward and test myself – in fact, so much so that on beginning my first degree at university I felt like I had just walked off the edge of a cliff.



At university there were very few if any rules and much less in the way of head-to-head competition and people pushing you hard from the outside. So, in the first six months I really struggled to make the adjustment, ultimately giving up my fully paid RAF scholarship and embracing more of the laid-back student lifestyle. I think if it hadn't been for climbing I would have lost my mind completely. Luckily for me, I was able to match my first choice of university with the best town in the UK at that time for climbing, Leeds (ranked number one in a climbing magazine survey at the time). Thus by the end of the first year I was pretty much living the dream for me at that time.

That first year of my first degree was more about developing my climbing than concentrating on university studies – much to the annoyance of my first supervisor, Geoff, who had to sit me down at the end of the first year and ask me straight out what my priorities were and whether I was intending on turning up more. He was a great guy and knew through the rumour mill that I was doing cool things in the climbing world, but ultimately had to take his stance as a professor and keep me in line. It absolutely wasn't that I didn't want to study my course, it was just that I was trying to be clever and juggle aspirations in both, achieving in climbing as well in academia simultaneously. In reality something would have to give at a particular time, but me being me I refused to believe it and plowed on regardless.

On arriving at university in week one, I was just a pretty average level climber. Leeds and Sheffield were the biggest and leading climbing towns in the UK. Coming to Leeds thinking I was great soon collided with the reality that actually I was relatively average compared to climbers here. But I wasn't deterred for a second and immediately set about creating a steep improvement curve. I got a part-time job at the main climbing gym, made connections with the top local climbers and got into the routine of training up to six days a week. On reflection, this was the time when I really and truly first started to learn about full-time, professional-style sports training. Until then I had thought I knew how to train hard and well, but this first year in Leeds was a real eye-opener and awareness-expander.

I experimented with different diets and measured their effect on performance. I started learning the training programs of the top climbers and how they prepared for training sessions and how they got the most out of them. I began competing more and learning from local competitions and applying these learnings to national competitions. More influential still, I immersed myself into a network of people who were connected internationally, allowing me to regularly meet top climbers from around the world and learn their styles too. One particular area that intrigued me greatly and that has been a passion for me ever since was understanding training and injuries and how to push the body hard week in and week out without sustaining a serious injury.

By the end of this first year it was clear that climbing was going to be a huge part of my life for a long time and that there would be potential in the future to have some really amazing experiences. But for the time being it was head down and just keep learning and improving.

My ensuing years in Leeds were a little easier on the schedule. I was getting good enough in climbing to compete nationally and in the odd international competition, while the hard training was becoming more routine and normal. I was learning how to balance this better with my studies and hauled back my grades towards something good. This made me a little more at peace generally, as my chosen fields of applied sciences and applied physics were subjects I genuinely loved.

At university I had been extremely fortunate to be a part of the golden period in the school's 550-year history. One of the upshots of the school's relentless success in that period was the quality of teaching we received. Two teachers in particular stood out for me, Dr. Foster and Dr. Lindley. Like most of my teachers they held PhDs in the subjects they were teaching and truly knew their material inside and out. Dr. Foster taught me physical geography and geology and introduced a number of novel teaching concepts to the school that we benefited hugely from. Dr. Lindley taught me physics and brought a relatively dry subject to life. His stories of working in the US for NASA were enough to inspire us and make us want to study physics in the future. I never got to reconnect to him post-university but I guess he would have been pleased to know that I went on to study physics beyond school.

If I'm honest I never entirely knew how I might apply physics in the future to do something meaningful in the world that could provide a paycheque. In fact, after completing my third degree in Aberdeen, Scotland, I still wasn't sure how I would weave a career and bring together the different skills I had picked up and refined over the years. What was clear after university was that climbing had to be a big part of my life. Now, I was keener than ever to travel and climb more internationally and build momentum in the biggest international competitions.