THE

# Speed

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## INTO THE COLD V.003 – Speed



# Special to win, the desire to succeed, the urge to reach your full policy of the door to personal excellence. "Special unlock the door to personal excellence." Special unlock the door to personal excellence."

Stops.

In this exploration of 'Speed', we ask the question - what happens when speed suddenly comes to a halt?

We're not talking about circumstances beyond our control such as weather halting a race, but when the physical body of the participant breaks down.

# How Do We Deal with Vulnerability?

This story written by Aaron Bible featuring runners Hillary Allen and Norma Bastidas and Stacy Bare, an Iraq war veteran and outdoor enthusiast, who share vulnerabilities around injury and speak to the implications of recovery, rehabilitation, prescription drugs and addiction in an industry that almost solely focuses on speed and heroism.





Almost every athlete has experienced the internal struggle that comes with being injured.

# What Keeps Us Moving When Speed Comes to a Standstill?

The sound of a train wreck happening in real time

By Aaron H. Bible



Screeching breaks. Grinding metal. Screaming. Breaking. The sounds of complete collapse and physical chaos, followed by extreme confusion. Frustration leads to sadness to depression and hopelessness. The grieving process must be allowed to take place. But somehow we always come back

I've been exploring athletic injury in a time of high momentum and anticipation for more years than I care to admit, for as long as I've been pushing myself outdoors really, including many near death episodes, losing friends, and listening to learn from everyone I can. What are we running from, or is it for?

We've all been there, especially those that really push it, the ones you hear about.

Trail running's Rob Krar,
Hillary Allen and Norma
Bastidas. Cycling's
Tom Danielson.
Climbing's Renan Ozturk.
Even wanna-be's like
myself, every damn
season with broken
bones, head injuries,
and disease.

Just scratching the surface, some of the most incredible athletes in the world live on the knife-edge of triumph and depression, between elation and insanity, tipping dangerously over one side when things go wrong.

What motivates us to push these boundaries, and do we even know the consequences of what might happen when our speed comes to a halt, when we hover on the edge, if we fall the wrong way — due to the wind, our mental state, hunger, cold or some other vagary of nature — how do we know, will we be able to recover, when we were pushing to escape that very thing in the first place? Perhaps it's the joy in the suffering;

### At Least I'll Die Trying.

What happens emotionally and physically, when you aren't able to complete the goal? I'll never forget Renan's voice in the documentary Meru, repeating "I just wanted to be part of the team." What do the months and years of preparation and sacrifice and tradeoffs really mean? How do we process it? There is something so humbling in these losses, so humanizing, so depressing, vulnerable, privileged. But it's real. And we must heal, and move forward, pulling our heads from our hands and wiping the blood off our heart wound onto our sleeve and sucking up the tears and putting the blade to the grindstone one more time, lest we selfishly take away from the efforts we began in the first place.

"I was about 12 miles from the next checkpoint when I slipped and heard a pop in my knee," said Norma Bastidas – famed as the fastest female in history to run seven ultra marathons through the planet's most unforgiving environments on seven continents in seven months. Her run across the globe across deserts and rainforests and high peaks has always been in support of the blind and visually impaired – a condition from which her son suffers

But this time she was in the middle of the Yukon Arctic Ultra, a 430-mile run, bike, or ski along the Yukon Quest Trail, arguably the coldest ultra-marathon in the world, now in its 16th year. "I was ahead of most of the competitors because I had trouble sleeping the night before, so I headed out to the next checkpoint way before dawn. It must have been this decision that ultimately influenced what happened. After injuring my knee, my pace slowed significantly. And when I saw the snowmobile I knew it was over. When I arrived to the checkpoint, there was another athlete that was not allowed to continue either, and the medical crew was busy that evening discussing which athletes were allowed to go on. By next morning we were hearing of other athletes that scratched during the night, and one was being evacuated by air with severe frostbite. It was a long ride on snowmobile back to town."

Unfortunately on the ride home the snowmobile was thrown into the air on an unexpected bump at high speed and came down sideways on Bastidas' leg. "What was a small tear turned into a severe injury, but fortunately didn't break bones. By the time we arrived to the hotel, it became obvious I had made the right decision as more and more athletes were dropping out with frostbite. But it didn't ease the pain that night.

"I was safe and warm in a comfortable bed but utterly miserable. No part of me wanted to be there. The disappointment mixed with self-doubt, and the physical pain sent me into a downward spiral," Bastidas told me. "Yet I'm not disappointed about my performance, or what happens next, because it is in this time of pain that I learn about myself. It is by facing pain and fear head on that I become stronger.

# PTSD and Bipolar Disorder aren't going anywhere — and neither am I.

Bastidas suffers from PTSD as a result of childhood poverty, abuse and addiction growing up in a dangerous part of Mexico. "I left a cartel ruled city in Culiacan, Sinaloa, many years ago and found hardship and violence everywhere I went; until I finally moved to Canada and was able to start over." Her next project will take her back across the U.S. / Mexico border.

### Human. Broken.

To a boxer, speed is everything. The art of hitting while not getting hit. When that speed comes to a sudden halt, the results are devastating to the athlete.

Completely engrossed in Norma's story, I am forced to ponder my own athletic crashes.

I was pissing blood and going in and out of massive pain attacks, and quickly had to have a stent inserted up into my kidney, followed by a surgery to remove more than a dozen stones, some as big as a centimeter in diameter, on the verge of infection. No one would allow me to continue to fight. I was trying to hide and suffer through my condition to reach a goal I had created for myself for reasons even I didn't understand.

Having never done a fundraiser before, generally ignoring all fundraising emails and Facebook requests, glossing over them but feeling good that other people were out there doing them, I had no idea how hard raising money would be for a charity boxing match.

It kept me up at night, and took many hours during the days writing emails, doing social media posts and fundraisers. I thought people would be stoked to cough over thousands of dollars to see me get my ass kicked, or kick someone's ass, and some people were. The passion to follow through on something big had swept over me, as it had to for me to be successful. So what happens when a ski bum overcomes kidney disease, herniated discs, self-employment and a toddler to become a boxer? In this case, it ended in disappointment that I'm still trying to come to terms with.

Fighting is the ultimate test of athletic endurance, pitting yourself against another human being in a ring with only a little bit of leather to protect you from concussion and severe beating. Unlike biking, you can't just put your foot down. You can't eddy out. And you can't come to a swooshing stop to catch your breath mid-way down the mountain. I had no idea how hard it would be, how much I would personally have to give up, or what I thought I was going to get out of this thing; and it was also a painful reminder of how tied up my ego is with my athletic ability.

I had little experience or exposure to boxing prior to 2003 when I entered graduate school at the Savannah College of Art and design, limited to the movies and the prizefights, often jaded and romanticized. But looking for something active and cool to photograph in Savannah, Georgia, led me into a foreign, dark, appealing place off the beaten path called Jarrell's Gym. The fighters there for some reason took me immediately under their wings, allowing me access. Why they would be so cool to a dumb ass white kid art student I have no idea, but they let me in, and I ended up working out there and photographing for a couple of years. Ten years later now, leaving my pregnant wife at home to deal with changing diapers, feeding a family and my dog and dealing with our Airbnb and our bills, in January of 2019 I committed to a life in the gym for six months.

# Train Hard, Fight Easy.

About halfway through I suffered a bruised rib during sparring — I had just been tossed in with a monster basically my first time really sparring — and it seemed like everyone was constantly fighting off sickness that winter being inside all the time, but things started to get serious. My trainer stopped the hand holding and started putting the hammer down. I didn't know at the time if this was what I needed or not, but it felt good, and at this point

### I Realized I Had Never Been Broken Before.

My parents let me quit everything, and never cared how competitive I was. I'd push myself and been pushed in outdoor sports as an adult, trail running, climbing and skiing, but not like this. I pretty much sucked at team sports growing up but I loved playing ice hockey, and that led me to discover I was a decent skier. After high school, rock climbing, whitewater paddling, backpacking and skiing became my whole focus in life. I finally had found sports that fed my soul, and I could actually see a career happening around being outside, perhaps as a raft guide or a park ranger, or maybe an adventure journalist. We liked to smoke weed and paddle rivers and climb peaks; we certainly weren't racing.

The one thing I know for sure is that to be really good at something you have to give up something else. I blew off my wife's 12-week prenatal appointment because I had to train in the gym with a broken rib.

It's so simple yet impossible to attain as it became a black hole of fitness in a race against the clock. Luckily I already knew how to suffer. But training for a boxing match is like training for a marathon, a dance competition and a back alley brawl all at the same time. I'd never had trouble getting in shape and pulling off a race before, what's the big deal?

When I was into the depths of the suffering I kept thinking back to the night our daughter was born. She did not want to come out and my wife labored for 21 hours. The end was especially hard, she was exhausted, fatigued, completely spent, in pain. I remember promising myself, god, someone, that if we can just get this baby out with everyone not dying, I will never complain again. And I would cling to this thought as I was getting hit in the face and banging my fists against sand filled leather under fluorescent lights in a dingy gym, eking out the last push ups of the day. Evading and counter attacking quickly and brutally, as brutal as the doctors who had to go into my body with stints and cameras and lazers and remove jagged stones from my organs. A complete stop for me and a mind fuck I was even less prepared for than kidney surgery or any other crash or disappointment I had been through yet.

"The only way you can face the challenge is by going in with the best preparation possible. It's easier to accept falling short when you know it was your best," Bastidas said, a metaphor I could relate very directly to boxing. "A lot of people love accomplishing a goal...I love the work and preparation that is required for such events." Which makes failure all the more difficult to deal with, like an Everest climber turned away at the ice field after dozens of thousands of dollars and years preparing.

"While I was still at the Yukon aid station waiting to be evacuated I tried to hold it together until I could privately grieve," Bastidas said. "I was angry at first because the accident could have been prevented."

Of course fatigue and extreme temperatures make it easy to make mistakes."

"Once I got home I entered into a severe depression," she explained. "It's not that exercising or competing at this level causes depression — just like being a writer doesn't make you an alcoholic — but training helps me manage the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and bipolar disorder. It's not a cure, it's just one of the tools I use to help manage my conditions. At the same time my marriage had ended because I lost the ability to engage on anything, and for the next few months I just sat in my room grieving something that wasn't tangible to anybody else but me"

"My kids know that endurance events make me happy and when I fall short and sometimes I enter into a funk, they understand that is part of journey," she said. "I rely on my family when I feel I can't manage it."

The hardest thing about having to drop out, said Bastidas, was doubting if she made the right decision, quitting before an actual rescue. "There are athletes that keep pushing way past where it's safe. It's such a badge of honor and it makes for a better story," she said. "After all, there aren't movies about an athlete making the right decision safely."

In the end, what is the process of reinventing oneself, for better or worse? Or as chef, coach and Skratch Labs founder Allen Lim likes to say, you have to be really good at pushing the boulder back up the hill. If I could never box or even walk again would I have the courage to drag myself up mountains in any way possible like Vasu Sojitra the one-legged uphill skier? Whether you are simply sidelined with back pain or lose a limb in Iraq, we all face the same challenges in the end.

Stacy Bare — husband, father, climber and filmmaker — is an Iraqi veteran who came home and found a path to salvation and healing in the outdoors. "There's something in us that pushes us toward survival and continuation. Why live every day?" says Bare. "It's an internal, even arrogant belief that if I live I can make other people's lives better. Many may not articulate that but I think it's a sense of altruism. If I die in combat — I leave a greater burden to my friends. I actually think addiction is the same side of this coin — I drink because I need to dull the pain. If I can dull the pain I can continue to live."

We think of alcoholism and addiction as a destructive behavior—but the behavior itself is actually constructive, a means to cope, he says. "The behavior is in many ways heroic—at least for a while. The substance used in the behavior is destructive and has significant consequences, so the goal would be to shift not the impulse of survival but how that impulse manifests. Even as athletes many of our goals are driven by a desire to either support or be supported by a community, individual, or group."

"I think we persevere because we believe joy is possible and that if we hang on a little longer we can find it — or awe — and maybe that will lead to a sense of fulfillment. Or love. Or gratitude," Bare explains. "The biggest challenge though is being able to learn the positive lessons, which may require gentle guiding. And that is hard to find even if you know to look for it."

"I would be okay as long as I can train," continued Bastidas. "When I was injured, physical therapy became the raft I hung on to when I emotionally spiraled. I spent hours at the gym enduring painful sessions just so I could go back to running. My initial reaction was to find quick relief, painkillers or any other drug that could bring relief to my physical and emotional turmoil. Fortunately I found other ways, physiotherapy, psychotherapy, keeping my brain busy by giving it a new challenge, I started to learn French, taking a break from social media so I wouldn't see my friends at races."

I fell off the wagon pretty hard myself while recovering from kidney surgery, and Bare was there to help guide me. I'm still asking myself, what next, but at least now I know there will be a next. We cannot continue to grieve but must make room for the new. Like getting sober, it's ok to grieve the loss of a past life, but it's up to you what to do with the one you've got in front of you.

"Embrace the grind and enjoy the challenge," says ultra-runner Hillary Allen, who had her share of struggles after she suffered a lifealtering accident during a race where she fell 150 feet off of a ridgeline. She's endured difficult rehab and successive injuries through her recovery over the past two years

"How do I hang on? I try to keep a positive perspective and when times get tough I tell myself that the discomfort is only temporary and that giving up is forever," says Allen, on her way to her next race in Chile. "It's a testament to fighting for what I love and not giving up on myself. Through every challenge there is an opportunity for growth and learning. That's how I keep going. Everything that matters takes hard work, patience and diligence."



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