

## From Injury to Ironman Podium

Thea Gudgeon

It all started with the London Marathon. As a child I would watch it on TV each year, caught up in the emotion of the competitors' stories, inspired by their determination. I didn't like sport, I was overweight and I didn't think I could ever do anything that tough.

But things change. I was unhappy with my life, so as I finished University I decided it was time to get healthy. I started running a little and discovered aerobics. 10-minute runs gradually became 10-mile runs, and I was regularly attending classes and even joined a gym. My newly found fitness and improved appearance was addictive, and I found myself entering my first Half Marathon. When someone asked if I was an instructor the idea stuck. I trained to teach aerobics and immediately started teaching in health clubs. Several years later I became a Personal Trainer and the same year found myself signing up for the London Marathon. I promised myself I would only do it once.



Once turned into just once more, and saw me finishing with a Championship qualifying time (sub 3hr15 for women). I realised I was quite good at this marathon thing and I was hooked, well, slightly obsessed! My quest for the sub 3 hour marathon began.

At that time I was teaching around 25 high intensity classes a week, including Step and Aerobics, Spin, Body Pump and Body Combat, and a few more! At the same time I was trying to complete the run training required to go under 3 hours for the marathon. I was in my twenties and I thought I could get away with pushing my body that hard. The fatigue and the niggling injuries began. I found myself in a cycle of set backs and was constantly trying to 'manage' my running without ever feeling fully fit. I was often tired. Training with injuries is something I see again and again in so many athletes, yet at the time, despite all my training and knowledge, I found that when it happened to me I lacked the strength to admit I needed to stop running and address the problems fully. My racing became a pattern of small advances forward, following by longer periods of setbacks. Mentally I had become so focused on times I wasn't even really enjoying running anymore – and I wasn't even a professional!

I started swimming just to have an alternative sport when I couldn't run. I was amazed just how much I enjoyed it (once I'd had some lessons), especially swimming in open water. The lure of triathlon reeled me in and I entered a few short races. But I was adamant that I was still a runner! What didn't help was that I was also a terrified road cyclist. If I wasn't quite so stubborn I probably would have given up on the whole idea of triathlon just so I didn't ever have to get on a bike. But I couldn't let the fear beat me so I stuck with it. Potholes, wet roads,

cars... they all terrified me. But descending was my biggest problem and yes, I can admit I have been so scared that I have actually cried!

I hadn't given up on the marathon, but long distance triathlon was particularly appealing so I had to stick with it. I completed my first 70.3 distance in July 2012 despite having an ongoing hip problem, but with the Alpes-Maritimes Marathon coming up in November 2012 I knew that something was seriously wrong.



The MRI in July 2012 showed a stress fracture through the base of my pelvis. I'd had it for many months at this time. Common in distance runners, a stress fracture is a fracture of a bone caused by repetitive (rather than sudden) mechanical stress. The acute injury is incredibly painful and initially requires immobilisation to allow the bone to heal. The chronic injury causes referred pain, highlighting the muscular imbalances that have often led to the injury. Treatment at this time involves rehabilitation and retraining of movement patterns, often with a Physiotherapist, to ensure the injury does not reoccur. I chose Pilates as my form of retraining. Using the range of machines I used the studio repertoire to mimic movement patterns and retrain weak muscles.

When a stress fracture occurs it is normal to have a DEXA bone-density scan to check for osteoporosis. Mine showed I was within the range for osteopenia (the range prior to osteoporosis). I was in total shock as my lifestyle encouraged constant weight bearing exercise across all my joints, and I didn't think I could possibly be at risk.

Ironically, at this time I was retraining in Pilates (from a previous qualification) and also training as a Structural Integrator. My career was moving in the direction of helping people to address and correct their Structural and Postural imbalances. For years I had helped my clients to get fitter/stronger/faster, whilst seeing their limitations caused by injuries and postural problems. I had moved away from overseeing their training sessions, and my work now involved helping them to achieve balance within their bodies, to live without pain and discomfort, and increase their sporting success. By some twist of fate I was being forced to take my own advice. And with the help of some brilliant therapists I began to address my own structural patterns and build a stronger body.

It wasn't easy. It required time, determination and focus. I had to channel the commitment I gave to my normal training into getting fixed. Mostly I felt driven, but occasionally I felt seriously fed up. But thankfully I am generally positive and I used the experience to learn and progress. I looked closer at my nutrition. I changed my opinion on high carb/low fat diets, and dramatically reduced my grain and sugar intake. I increased my protein and fat intake in the form of whole foods. I began to get most of my carbohydrate from fruit and vegetables. I got stronger and leaner, and more energised. I worked on fixing my body with precision and detail. I was gradually able to swim and cycle a little. Eventually I got the clearance to start running again.

Well I say 'start running again'. The reality of this was that I started with a minute jog on a treadmill with a minute walk. 10 times. Any distance runner reading this will understand my frustration! But gradually over a period of months I built it up. The day I was finally allowed to run outside was a huge relief. It was along the seafront in Nice, the day before the marathon that I should have been running with my friends. By December I was running 5km. And then I sprained my ankle on a pothole. I was out for another month! Somebody somewhere was laughing at me!

Watford Half Marathon loomed in February 2013 – I hadn't trained, let's face it, I hadn't run! On the start line I doubted I would make it to the halfway point. The start gun went and I started running. And the strangest thing happened – it felt easy, and I was running fast. It kept feeling easy and I kept running fast! I finished with a course Personal Best of 1hr29. I've only ever run that distance faster once before – I was amazed as everyone else! I also realised that the time in the saddle on the bike had had a seriously positive effect on my run fitness.



With my first Ironman coming up in Lanzarote in May I kept training, clocking less run miles than ever before but focusing on quality training and ongoing rehabilitation.

On 18<sup>th</sup> May 2013 I completed Lanzarote Ironman in a time of 11hrs34, placing 3<sup>rd</sup> in my Age Group. It is considered the hardest Ironman in the world. I hadn't drowned, I didn't crash my bike, and I completed the marathon in 3hr32. And I'd loved it! My next goal is to qualify for the World Championships in Kona, Hawaii. Taking a year out to correct my biomechanics has left me stronger than ever, and totally changed my perspective on training volume.

I work now as a Pilates teacher, and in addition to Sports Massage Therapy I specialise in bodywork with Connective Tissue (Fascia) to create postural balance and alignment. I had to put faith in the work I do and it has helped me to get myself to a point where my body is the strongest it has ever been. I want to help athletes or people with active lifestyles, and if reading this has struck a chord and you would like more information on the work I do – whether you are a serious athlete or enthusiastic amateur, please contact me at [www.thea.co.uk](http://www.thea.co.uk), where you will find more details of the work I do, the sessions I offer, and my qualifications and experience.

Thea Gudgeon  
Email: [thea@thea.co.uk](mailto:thea@thea.co.uk)  
Web: [www.thea.co.uk](http://www.thea.co.uk)  
Mobile: 07798 603620