

After

The

Fall

How a near-fatal accident helped ultrarunner **Hillary Allen** find a new way to live

WORDS BY ADHARANAND FINN

**IN AUGUST 2017,
HILLARY ALLEN
WAS THE NUMBER
ONE
RANKED
SKYRUNNER
IN THE
WORLD**

and she was taking on the 57km Tromsø Skyrace in Norway. Three hours in, as she made her way over a particularly tricky ridge, a rock gave way under her foot. It was a moment that almost ended her life, but instead it gave her a new one.

Hillary's new book, *Out And Back: A Runner's Story Of Survival Against All Odds*, reveals everything that happened to her after that life-changing moment. It's harrowing to read her account of the fall. 'I hit the ground again and again and again,' she writes. 'With each impact, I felt bones breaking, skin ripping.' She ended up falling 150ft down the side of the mountain. The runner coming up the ridge behind her saw her fall and rushed over to help. Two years later, Manu Par says that the sound of her falling continues to haunt him. Even just witnessing her fall left him struggling for years to regain his own confidence while out running in the mountains.

For Hillary, the path back was far from straightforward. But along the way, she learned many valuable lessons. At first, in the moments after the fall and even as she was falling, she was sure she was done for. 'I heard my own voice,' she writes, 'floating somewhere above my head, declaring calmly, "Hillary, this is it. You're dying."'



Hillary Allen just minutes before her near-fatal fall at the 2017 Tromsø Skyrace in Norway – an accident that changed her life forever.



PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHANNA SIRING; IAN CORLESS; JACK ATKINSON
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As people rushed to help her, including renowned mountain runner and race director Kilian Jornet and photographer Ian Corless, they found (in Hillary's words) 'a bundle of bones that didn't look like arms, and my wrists were all turned the wrong way'.

It turned out she'd broken a total of 14 bones, including in her back in multiple places, multiple ribs and both wrists. She also had a serious 'foot-changing' fracture in one of her feet, which led a doctor to tell her it was looking unlikely she'd ever compete in a race again.

Corless said that in the days after the accident, he was just hoping she'd be able to walk and live a normal life. The idea of her racing again wasn't a consideration.

The photographer describes seeing her appear on the ridge and joking with her, calling her 'smiler' as he prepared to take her picture. 'As she disappeared from my shot, I asked her to climb over the peak ahead of me... then there was a sound – rocks moving, a scream – and then I watched her bounce down the mountain, finally coming to a stop. Motionless. I thought she was dead.'

'I watched her bounce down the mountain. I thought she was dead'

In the days following the fall, as she lay in the hospital in Norway, Hillary says her spirit was broken. What she struggled to come to terms with most, she says, is that she'd gone from a super-fit mountain runner to someone completely dependent on others even to sit up in bed. She says the sense of uselessness led to her slipping into a depression. 'I was definitely giving up,' she says.

It was a nurse who stopped her from slipping away completely, with a few frank, well-timed words. 'This isn't the end for you, Hillary,' the nurse said. 'Now is the time to fight... you're not done yet.'

STARTING AT ZERO

THE FIRST STEP was to overturn the sense of self-loathing she felt in the months following the accident. 'As a professional athlete, I'd built a career on being capable, strong and competent in my own body,' she writes in her book. But now, she felt weak and was in need of constant assistance – and she hated it.

Hillary says this mental readjustment to who she was after the fall was the biggest challenge she faced – even more than the physical challenge of getting back on her feet and running again. She says that when athletes get injured and are no longer able to train and compete, it can lead to a profound loss of self. 'I felt like I'd lost

myself, my purpose in everyday life and my direction and reason to keep going every day,' she says.

This thinking was a slippery slope and the only way out was to completely forget about running and to stop seeing herself – defining herself – as a runner. 'I had to take a step back from running because seeing it in my daily life made me depressed and hopeless that I'd ever get there again. So I had to completely let go of that and accept I might not race again. That letting go allowed me to meet myself where I was and start back at zero.'

The physical recovery also had to start back at zero. Two and a half months after the fall, after undergoing numerous operations, she was told she could try walking again. The doctor took away the

mobility scooter she'd been using to get around and asked her to try a few steps across his office. Muscle atrophy had left her once strong legs skinny and weak, and even those few steps in the doctor's office left her with a sore calf and intense pain in her foot like she was stepping on needles. This was all normal, the doctor reassured her, explaining that the nerves in her foot were just extra sensitive after not being in contact with the ground for so long.

It was weeks before she was able to walk steadily without wobbling. Yet, for all the physical difficulties, it was still the mental perception of who she was that continued to be the biggest challenge.

A subtle change of perspective helped Hillary learn to accept the assistance she needed without it leading to continuous doubts and questions about her self-worth. 'I started to realise there wasn't weakness in needing or accepting help. In fact, there was a beauty to it.' She says that her need for help to complete the simplest tasks led her to form close relationships that wouldn't have existed otherwise and showed her that she was part of a community.

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE

HILLARY SAYS THAT a big breakthrough in her recovery came when she learned acceptance – to accept her situation and to accept herself as she was.

Being an elite athlete had meant always pushing to improve, which inherently implied a refusal to accept things as they were. But she found that this mindset didn't help with her recovery.

She says she'd always affiliated the word 'acceptance' with settling for second best and had wanted nothing to do with it. To be successful, she'd always told herself that she wasn't good enough; that she always needed to be better.

But after Hillary began working with psychotherapist Timothy Tate, she could see that this approach wasn't only hindering her recovery from injury, but was actually detrimental to success in life more generally. Far from holding her back from pushing to be successful – as she imagined it would – Tate told her that self-acceptance would relieve the pressure she put on herself and allow her to fulfil her full potential. He said that accepting herself wouldn't stop her from trying her best because that's just how she was. 'It's ingrained in your DNA,' he told her.

Once she made this shift in mindset and started accepting things as they were, Hillary says that she saw huge improvements in her life. 'Problem-solving became easier,' she says. 'And I began to trust myself again. I started to rely on and take care of myself, no matter what problem was thrown my way.'

As an elite athlete, Hillary had associated the word 'acceptance' with settling for second best. To be successful, she'd told herself that she always had to do better. But in the aftermath of her fall, this mindset hindered her recovery and it was only when she realised just how detrimental it was to her way of life that she could accept things as they were. 'I started to take care of myself,' she says.



HOW TO BOUNCE BACK

Advice from Hillary Allen on recovering from serious injury

Think small

'Set baby goals to get you through each moment. Everything you can do – whether it's boring physical therapy exercises, stretching or taking time to meditate or visualise your future recovery – is progress. I thought about the small things and I'd tell myself to do what you can today, to set yourself up for success tomorrow. The more I did that, the closer I came to recovery.'

Talk the talk

'The other thing that's most important is self-belief and positive self-talk. It's the most powerful tool and something I'd do to bring my mind to a more positive place.'

Find the write path

'I also used journalling and the written word to process both my negative and positive thoughts. It helped me to get out of the negative thoughts and to eventually turn them into positive ones.'

She also realised that her fear of never being the same again, of never being good enough, had been holding her back from trying to start running again. Accepting herself – however things turned out – freed her from this fear and allowed her to simply try. And so, within a few months of taking those first few steps in the doctor's office – and with full acceptance of her new limitations – she started running on the trails again with friends.

'I started to be less afraid of the end result,' she says. 'I rediscovered the joy the movement of running gave me.' This change of perspective made such a difference to her life that she says she ended up actually feeling thankful for everything she had been through. Looking back, she realised that she'd been sucked into a vicious cycle that many elite ultrarunners find themselves in, where in order to be the best and to finish on top of the podiums, you start overtraining, risking burnout, and completely losing the joy of running. 'Thankfully,' she writes in her book, 'my path took a different turn and I had the chance to slow down. I was forced to slow down. Falling off that cliff forced me

'Falling forced me into a recovery period, physically and mentally'

into a recovery period, not only physically, but mentally.'

Could she really mean that, though? Could she really be thankful to have gone through the horror of the fall and the horrific injuries it left her with? 'You know, it's a bit of

both,' she says now. 'Certainly, my body has been through a lot and, years later, I'm still dealing with injuries related to that fall. So, of course, I wish it didn't happen. I'm still fearful and still have some trauma. But yes, I'm also thankful that it happened. It's changed my life in countless ways. I'm so grateful for the appreciation I now have for life and running. It's given me a new emotional depth that I didn't possess before. I don't think I'd have been able to reach this point in my life without the accident.'

A NEW PATH

AS TATE SAID, for Hillary, self-acceptance would never mean lazing around day after day eating doughnuts on the sofa. That just wasn't who she was. And so, a mere 10 months after the near-fatal fall, she rather incredibly found herself standing on the start line at the Broken Arrow Skyrace in California.

The day before the main event, the 52km ultra, she decided to test out her body with the vertical kilometre race – a steep uphill event that rises 1,000m in altitude over a short but lung-bursting course. She wasn't there to race hard, she told herself, but to just enjoy it. To see how things went after everything she'd been through. But, as Tate had said, racing was just in Hillary's DNA. She finished in second place – just 15 seconds behind the winner.

Despite this confidence boost, she was still racked with self-doubt as she prepared for the ultra the next day. Unlike the vertical kilometre, which just goes up, this race would require some swift descending over technical terrain – the sort she'd fallen on 10 months earlier.

Her emotions were so raw that she kept stopping to cry around the first of the race's two big loops, braking fearfully on the descents, and thinking that she was no good. But on the second lap, she started to find some belief. She says she started to smile more than cry and pushed the pace a little on the downhills. 'As I crossed the finish line,' she says, 'I broke down in tears again, but this time happy ones.'

In her book, she writes: 'This wasn't a comeback. It was something different entirely, something sweeter, more unique and distinctive. I was on a new path.'

Although she hadn't finished anywhere near the front, Hillary says she couldn't have run at all if she hadn't learned to accept herself as she was. While she'd always believed that the drive to be better must come from dissatisfaction with the present state of things, she ►



Hillary Allen says that she didn't even know what position she was in until she arrived at the end of the 48km Cortina Trail race and they held up the finishing tape. She'd won. 'I wasn't back. I was better, improved and new. I was different.'

says that all that self-deprecation could quickly become a limiting force. 'I had to learn to accept the fact that even though I might never be satisfied, I'll always push for excellence, and that to meet myself where I was, even if it wasn't where I wanted to be, didn't stop me wanting more. Just because I was working back or starting over, it didn't mean that I'd lost my drive to be my best self. That will always be part of me,' she writes.

The proof that this was working came just a week later when she turned up at a race in the Dolomites in Italy to support her North Face teammates, but at the last minute decided to enter the 48km Cortina Trail race. 'I didn't know if I was recovered from my two races the previous weekend,' she says. 'But I didn't care; I just wanted to run.' Happy to be back racing again, to have defied all the odds and proven the doctors wrong, she spent the race simply enjoying the feeling of running through the mountains, smiling at everyone as she went by. On the descents she felt timid at first, but she began to gain more confidence with each one – and soon she was flying.

She says she didn't even know what position she was in until she arrived at the end and they held up the finishing tape. She'd won. 'I wasn't back. I was better, improved and new – I was different.'

CLOSING THE LOOP

HILLARY'S NEW-FOUND ABILITY to accept things as they were and to trust in the process of recovery was firmly tested six months later when, heading home after a snowy run in the mountains near Boulder, Colorado, just a few blocks from her house, she slipped and fell. As her right ankle twisted, she heard a pop and crumpled to the cold, snowy ground. 'I screamed inside my head,' she says. 'I knew what had just happened. I'd broken my ankle.'

Accepting this new setback wasn't easy, of course, and Hillary writes that she was surprised by the intensity of her grief. But instead of being overwhelmed by it, she says that this time she accepted these

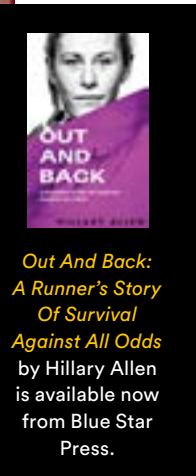
feelings of despair. And she didn't let them turn into self-loathing. 'The difference after this surgery was that I leaned into grief; I really felt the lows, mourned my loss and let it run its course.'

The result was that instead of feeling depressed for five months, as she had been the first time, she was ready to begin her recovery after one week.

'I let the wave of emotions come and go,' she says.

Recovering from this second setback left her again feeling – to some degree at least – thankful for the lessons it had taught her. 'I'd really have it no other way,' she says of the two accidents. 'These tough

'Never give up on something you love, even if the journey is full of obstacles'



Out And Back: A Runner's Story Of Survival Against All Odds by Hillary Allen is available now from Blue Star Press.

Two years after her fall, Hillary describes crossing the finish line of the Tromsø Skyrace in Norway as one of the sweetest moments of her life. 'I'd closed the loop,' she says. 'I'd conquered my fears and confronted them head-on.'

periods in my life have been defining moments – forming my character and showing me what the human spirit, what my spirit is capable of.' The full circle of her recovery came when, two years after her first fall, she returned to Norway to run the Tromsø Skyrace. Despite all she'd learned, the journey to the start line wasn't easy. On her way to her first proper Skyrace since her accident – a race in Italy a few weeks before the Tromsø Skyrace – she had to stop her

car on the side of the road because of a panic attack. As she sat there trying to decide whether to turn back or continue on to the race, she felt full of fear about what lay ahead, and whether she could cope with competing in a Skyrace again. Unsure of what to do, she decided to call her coach back in the US.

He told her that the fear she was feeling was normal, and that she could come through it. He told her he believed in her. She restarted her car and made it to the race. Despite feeling nervous on the difficult, snowy descents, she made it to the finish line in one piece. She found herself in tears afterwards. 'But those tears came from the fullness of the journey I'd just made,' she says. 'I'd overcome my own fear and doubt. I'd ignored expectation and let go of pride.'

The final step in this journey came as she made her way over the same ridge in Tromsø where her life had changed so dramatically two years earlier.

As she got to the spot where she'd fallen, she stopped and took it all in. She felt strangely detached. 'Looking down at the vertical terrain, I didn't cry. I just observed,' she writes in her book. 'I looked around for answers; an explanation of what had caused me to fall. I saw nothing. No release.'

That release came later, when she crossed the finish line and hugged her mother and Manu Par, the runner who had first come to her aid after her fall. She says that it was one of the sweetest moments of her life. 'I'd closed the loop,' she says. 'I'd conquered my fears and confronted them head-on.' As she looked around at all the smiling faces of the runners, volunteers and supporters, she again felt thankful.

She thought to herself: 'Thank you for fighting for yourself, for not giving up, for reminding yourself and others what you can do, what we can do when we challenge what we think is impossible.'

This, says Allen, is why she wrote her book in the first place. 'I wanted to show everyone that they, too, possess these qualities to find their own inner strength and let impossible situations become possible and shape them for the better.'

She ends the book with a message to anyone recovering from a serious setback: 'Never give up on something you love, something that's part of you, even when the journey is full of tears and obstacles. Keep holding on to it. Belief has the power to challenge the impossible.'

Adharanand Finn is the author of *The Rise of the Ultra Runners* (£14.99, Faber)



SHIFT YOUR OUTLOOK

Hillary Allen on how to find acceptance, joy and gratitude in running and in life

Don't fixate on results

'Winning or doing well in a race is only ever a temporary high. Afterwards, the first question is always, "What's next?" I now make sure my running is not solely about the competition, but that I embrace and enjoy the entire process of moving and training – even the tough days.'

Be flexible with your training plan

'Running can sometimes become a numbers game in which you're stressing about times and mileage.

In the past I had a hard time accepting I sometimes needed to slow down, worrying that I was losing fitness or being lazy, instead of listening to my body and giving it time to rest.'

Time away from something is the best way to know if you really love it

'It was during my months away injured that my desire to run and race again really began to grow. I realised then how much I enjoyed the sights, smells and sounds of nature along the way and

how it makes me feel connected to myself, my body and the world around me. Running is my church.'

You're never done

'Whatever life throws at you, whatever setbacks, never stop overcoming or learning or gaining new perspectives. Therein lies the beauty and adventure of life. We never know what it'll bring, but whenever we fall, we can always get up again, dust ourselves off and become better.'