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'Wednesday, four miles, 30 minutes, six x 400m, off 30-second recovery, times of reps was 72 secs, 71 secs, 70, 72, 73, 71.'

'Oi, Ron, get up!'

'Ah, Dad, give us a break, I'm knackered.'

'Come on, son, time for a lovely little run. You know you want it.'

Jesus. I was about 12 when I started running. Dad made me run, and it was like the Chinese water torture. I hated it. I was always talking about leaving school early to play snooker. And Dad said, you've got to be disciplined about it – you've got to go to bed early, do your three-mile run every day, keep fit. Healthy body, healthy mind. He said if I was physically fit I'd be able to focus better when I went down the snooker club. Dad realised I was already capable of winning little tournaments if I could have the edge of being fit. Back then snooker players didn't bother with fitness. The opposite, in fact. Hurricane Higgins would always have a fag on the go, and a pint of Guinness at his side. The Canadian Big Bill Werbeniuk even got a sick note from the doctor saying that he had to drink beer when he was playing to control the tremor in his arm. That

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was his excuse anyway. As for all the up-and-coming kids, most of them spent their time playing fruit machines and gambling rather than keeping fit.

Sometimes when I ran, Dad followed me round in the car. It was horrible. I was always a bit scared of him – certainly too scared to say no to him. But there was sense in what he was saying. I wasn't fast, but I was okay – I was a bit porky, but I could get round three miles easily enough, and keep going.

In the end I stayed on at school till I was 16, when I turned professional. I also kept up with the daily three-milers. Not that I had any choice. But it all changed when Dad got banged up for murder. As soon as he was charged I stopped running and training. I stopped doing everything really. I wasn't in the right frame of mind. My mind was elsewhere. I couldn't believe what was happening to my world, or that my dad could be charged with murder – let alone be guilty. I was in pieces. Then he came out on bail, and he insisted I went back to the old routine.

'Just because I've been away is no excuse for you to stop the running, is it, Ron?'

No excuse? What, he's been in nick for months, I'm in pieces for what the police say he's done to some poor fella, and he's having a go at me for not having a jog. Bloody cheek.

'No, Dad,' I muttered.

'Right, let's go, son.'

So I got my running shoes on, he got the car out and stalked me for three miles.

Bloody hell. I thought I was going to die. All it takes is a few months off the pace, and it's like you've never run in your life. My heart was going like crazy, my legs didn't belong to me and my feet were already blistering.

'See, not that bad, was it, Ron,' Dad said with a huge grin.

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‘No, not bad,’ I puffed. Not bad, my arse.

But Dad was right about body and mind. When I ran my snooker was better, and I did better in pro-ams, where both amateurs and professionals compete. Pro-ams are a long day; you’d get picked up at eight in the morning, get home at midnight if you got through to the final, and you had to keep focused throughout. Somehow, when I wasn’t running, my mind wandered all over the shop.

Also, weirdly, running helped me with my sweating problem. I’ve always been a hairy fella, and I’d find myself sweating under my arms, through jumpers and shirts. It was horrible; embarrassing. I found that when I wasn’t running my armpits were squirting like the Trevi Fountain. If I wasn’t running, I’d forever be in the toilets, drying my pits under the heater. As soon as I started again the problem would disappear. I sweated while running but afterwards I was fine. It’s like a detox – it just flushes the shit out of you. There were other advantages to running, too. My legs wouldn’t rub together and cause me chafing hell because they were slimming down.

Dad was in custody for nine months, and then he came out on bail, and the first thing he said was, you’ve got to start with your running again. I’d put on a bit of weight, but not changed drastically – except in my attitude. I’d become a procrastinator: ‘I can’t be bothered, I’ll do it tomorrow.’ So I started running again while he was out, and then when he was finally convicted for murder that was it. Boom! The end. I fucked it off for about six years. I swapped running for bingeing – on drink and drugs.

I knew I was losing it but I didn’t realise I was turning into a right porker. By the time I was 20, I’d got myself up to 15½ stone, a 37½-inch waist, and I could have fitted two 15-year-old Ronnies in my playing pants. I’d become huge – a rhinoceros of

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a fella – and I wasn't even aware of it. I just naturally grew into it, and nobody said anything to me about it.

I was out one night at a club with a mate, and someone said to this girl: 'That fella's Ronnie O'Sullivan.'

She looked at us and said, 'Is he the fat one or the skinny one?'

I was like, well, I know I'm not the skinny one because this geeza I was with was skinny. And I just thought, fuck, I must be fat. I'd never thought of myself as fat at all. It hadn't even crossed my mind. But that really hit home. If I could see the woman now I'd thank her and shake her hand and say, you've done me a massive favour. The next day I started training. I felt heavy, slobbish, gross, and I knew I had to sort it out.

So I started running regularly and got my weight down to a decent level. I lost three stone, and felt so much better for it. I'd had a big wobbly belly and now I'd started showing muscles. Wow! That was a mad feeling because it seemed to happen overnight. Until then, I couldn't see any results. Then one day, after about three months, I looked in the mirror and thought, fuckin' hell, I don't recognise that bloke. It was 1997, I was 22, and now I'd gone from 15½ to 12½ stone. Result!

I kept the running up for six to seven years. There were times when my head was in pieces – too many times to remember, to be honest – but I always think it would have been that much worse if I'd been doing no exercise. I'd go down the gym, run, get a swim in, play football occasionally. But nothing extreme. It was just a way of keeping myself in decent nick.

Then, in 2004 I started serious running. Competitive running. A mate of mine, Alan, who I ran with at the gym, said, come up to the running club, see if you like it. I was, like, alright, even though I didn't know anybody, and I'm shy by nature. I got to know a few of the lads there – they were a

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friendly bunch and said, d'you want to meet up on Sunday, we'll do a long run.

I was world champion at the time, but not in the best of spirits. I'd been in the Priory, come out, been clean for nine months, which was wonderful. I went to meetings every day – drug addiction, alcohol addiction – and I was feeling fantastic. I was reborn. I couldn't believe it. I was getting up in the morning, running, eating healthy food.

My life was good. I felt fit, fresh, alert. And that was all because of going to Narcotics Anonymous and getting structure to my days. Good structure. And because I was enjoying my snooker more my game was getting better and better, more like it was when I was a youngster.

I went to the meetings every night, and I was reminded where my addictions could take me. I kept away from all the nutters who were likely to tempt me, and got my head down on the pillow early every night so there was less chance of me weakening. I used Narcotics Anonymous as a drop-in centre, to stay around people who weren't using. And by 10.30 p.m. I'd be ready for bed anyway. It was that tricky time between 6.30 and 10.30 p.m. that was most tempting. I'd think, I'm bored, I've played snooker, done what I've had to do, I've got this three-hour gap to fill, what now? And that's when the meetings were so brilliant. They were perfect – I'd go to them, have a cup of tea, sit there, listen to what everyone had to say, say my little bit, have a cup of tea after, go for coffee. It was the company more than anything that helped.

I knew I didn't have the strength to say no to drink and drugs for ever. I was always tempted, and after nine months I gave in to that temptation. After that, every so often I'd go on a bender. I kept dipping into it now and again. Going on a bender here and there – a lot of puff, and I could get through

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15 pints of Guinness a night. It sounds a lot, but it isn't really when you're on the other stuff. You could drink all night if you were taking drugs, then you'd take more drugs because you were drinking. I loved a joint. The only problem with a joint is that one spliff follows another, and another, and then you get the munchies and you eat everything in the fridge, and put on loads of weight.

At the end of the night I'd go to someone's house, start smoking, and, boom! I felt good. Great! I knew I didn't want to get back on the constant drinking and drugging benders, but also I knew I didn't have the strength just to say no, never again. Then every now and then you'd have a night where you got a bit out of hand and you'd go, fuckin' hell what's happened now, and you'd think about all the stuff you learnt in the Priory about addiction, and you'd feel ashamed of yourself.

After my first bender, I got clean again for three to four months, and then went on another bender. It became a pattern. I thought, lovely: so long as I was going to my meetings, and was just dipping in and out, I'd be fine – it was just a bit of a release I was after. And, after all, the damage wasn't that bad – I'd justify it to myself, tell myself it was just the occasional drink or joint and so long as I wasn't doing it every day. But, of course, I was deluding myself because the reality was I was hooked on it.

At my worst I had to have a joint first thing in the morning just to function. Without it, I felt paranoid, uneasy in myself. So I thought, if I can keep the benders to once every two, three, four months and then have a blast. But loads of the time, the snooker got in the way of my benders rather than the other way round. It was as if I was in training for the benders. It was my Olympics. Every four months I'm going to get totally wasted. I'd tell myself that was a good reason to stay clean, you'll enjoy it more, you'll deserve it.

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I'm not really sure how I managed to get through the drugs tests during this period. I remember getting to every World Championship and thinking, I can't wait till this tournament is over 'cos then there's no more drugs tests, there's nothing for three months, so I can go out and smash it. I'd got caught once early on in my career, but that's all. I'd get tested between events, and I was just trying to judge it perfectly so there'd be no drugs left in my system, but I was pushing my luck.

My mum said to me, 'You're going to get caught soon. You can't carry on like this.'

I said, 'No, I'll be alright. As long as I don't overdo it and stop a week before the tournament I'll be fine.'

In the end it took a new addiction to knock the drink and drugs on the head. Running. So Alan got me to go to the club. I still run with him now – he's 50 and killing me at the moment. He's probably running 10 kilometres in 36 minutes just now, but he's one of the best vets in Essex.

I'd had a bit of a bender and saw Alan at the gym. He took a look at me, and could tell I wasn't at my best.

'What's up with you, Ronnie?'

'Ah, you know, Alan, bit of a night last night.'

'Looks like more than a bit to me,' he said.

I didn't answer.

'You alright, Ron?'

'Yeah.'

'I thought you were doing your NA and all that.'

'Yeah, I am.'

'Well, I'm sure massive benders aren't part of your twelve steps, are they?' He'd sussed me. Anyone else, I'd think they were taking a liberty, but he said it so kindly. I knew he was just thinking of me.

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I smiled at him – bit of a stupid smile, really, but I couldn't think of anything to say.

'Come on, Ronnie, come for a run with me. You don't need all this booze and stuff. Fresh air, get your heart pumping, serotonin, that's what you need.'

I did about five, six miles and it killed me. *Killed* me. Then he introduced me to the athletics club, Woodford Green in Essex, which is quite famous as it happens. Until then the only running I'd done was by myself or with a few fellas at the gym. And once I'd been to the running club for about two months I ran at the gym with normal members, and the other guys couldn't believe how fast I was.

The first time I went down the club I was a bit shy. I didn't say much, did my bit and sneaked off. But the runners were really friendly, and after two or three times they'd introduce themselves, and I'd go to the bar and have a glass of orange with them after we'd killed ourselves on the track. A few of them recognised me, but they didn't seem that interested in who I was. We never spoke about snooker; it was all running. Everyone left their job at the door. It was just about racing; who's running well. If you were into running, Tuesday night at the track was just the best thing.

There'd be 50 to 60 people on the track, running all kinds of distances, and javelin-throwers, shot-putters, long-jumpers, all sorts, and I just thought, blimey, there's so much going on here. Everyone had their own little group.

I've always tended to keep my head down when I've been out to places. People will recognise me, come up and talk to me. You get used to it. I don't mind people chatting to me, it's just when they start driving you mad and you think: 'Oh, mate, give it a rest!', and before long they do your head in. But this place was different. Just gentle chit-chat, encouraging you

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to run better. Eventually, once you got to know them, you'd get the odd one who might say: 'How are you doing with the snooker, Ron? I watch you', but generally they weren't interested. It was just times, races and who had decent form.

My first race was 3,000 metres, seven and a half laps on the track; 10.06 minutes was my time. I've only done it once, so it's my personal best. One of the coaches on the side was saying: 'Stay on his shoulder, stay on his shoulder', so I did. I was about 40 to 50 metres behind the next fella, and they meant use the one in front, to push yourself, then I'd come round for the next lap and he'd say: 'Push on now, Ron, push on to the next group', so I'd push on and I was thinking, I ain't got it in me, but I just found this speed. I thought, if the coach believes in me I must have it. So I went on and he'd be: 'Get on the next one, get on the next one now', so I'd push on to the next one, and by then I'd made up 40 to 50 metres, and on the final lap I was up with three of the faster boys and I remember just finding a sprint down the last 100 metres and I beat a couple of the runners who I would have never dreamt of getting in front of. So I surprised myself.

I'd been at the club around six months and was loving it. Then I started on the 10 kilometres. I don't know why 10 kilometres is such a perfect distance, but it is. I suppose it's a sprint, but still a long way. If you can run six miles you can run 10 miles, and if you can run 10 miles you can run 13. And the thing is, once I started running – really running – I wasn't interested in jogging, I wanted to give it my all. I'm not the first sportsman to get obsessed by the 10 kilometres – though maybe the others didn't to the same extent. The great England batsman Kevin Pietersen had the same thing. There was a time he was touring India, and all he seemed bothered about was getting his 10 kilometres down. He'd finish a day at a Test

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match, the team would all get in the coach and then he'd be, like, right I'm running six miles back to the hotel. At one point he said he had to decide whether to focus on getting a PB with his running or his cricket. I could understand it because that's just how I was.

I became a running bore. Just talked about it all the time. I knew I couldn't go to the snooker and bore them all with it because they weren't interested, but I could talk endlessly about it to the fellas at the club. In the end I stopped hanging round snooker venues or with players except when there was a match on. I used to get my mate to ring up the local running club if I was playing in, say, Telford, tell them I was coming down and that I'd like to join them for a run.

And if I wasn't out running I'd be having dinner with one of the runners I'd made friends with. The only way I could enjoy my snooker was if I could run while I was away, so snooker tournaments became like training camps – an opportunity to run with different runners and try different routes.

Running became so much more important to me than snooker. After a while I wasn't worried if I won the World Championship, so long as I could get my runs in and improve my PB. Everything else was secondary. I'd established ages ago that I had an addictive personality and that I tend to pursue things to the end. Now it was just about trying to make the addictions healthy ones. I knew if I was sitting in the pub or in a snooker hall I'd get bored and need a bit of excitement in my life – and that meant benders. So I thought, well, as long as I stay away from those places and hang around gyms and running clubs then I can channel that addiction for the good.

Running is such a different world from snooker. It's outdoors, it's physical and the very opposite of that claustrophobic snooker hall. Sometimes when I'm on TV I'm so aware of the

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camera picking up every tiny thing I'm doing – flicking my ear, picking my nose, twitching my eyes. It interrogates you. Horrible. But in some ways running and snooker aren't so different. You're still on your own – you get the disappointments, you get the glory, it's all for yourself. It's still a one-man-band sport. Whereas snooker is all about technique, running is much more blood, guts, determination and finding something within yourself to keep going. There are times when you think you can't keep going, but you do. And after a race you swear you're never going to put yourself through that again, as you cross the finishing line, but invariably you do. It's so painful, and you just wonder what made you do it. Nearly all runners feel the same – even those who make it look easy and win all the races. But when you see you had a good race, and you're getting somewhere, and getting rewards for it, it makes it all worthwhile.

When I did my first 10 kilometres at the club, it took me 39 minutes. Then I whittled it down by a couple of minutes – almost six-minute miling. The next goal was to get under six-minute miling. It was becoming an obsession. I thought if I could only run 5.50-minute miles I'd be happy. I did the Southend 10 kilometres and started off terribly. I felt really heavy legged because I'd been on a bender the night before; not a heavy bender, but I'd been smoking a few spliffs and that, and I remember getting out and feeling lethargic. The first three miles I thought, I'm going to have a nightmare here, then after that I started to get going. I picked a few off and ended up coming in my best time, which was 36.30 minutes. But I was still really pissed off because it meant I was just outside sub-six-minute miles.

Then I did the Essex cross-country, a tough 8½-mile race, and I came 27th. A decent result. I was cream-cracked by the end, no energy; I was just gone. I could have fallen asleep

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standing up. But everybody was saying to me, that was a really good race.

The biggest race I did was the Southern England cross-country. All the top boys who run in the European cross-countries and the World Championship were competing, and I finished 180th out of a field of 1,200. I came off saying that was horrible, and I never wanted to do it again. A friend said exactly the same, and he told me it was the hardest race I'll ever do – a three-mile loop over Parliament Hill that you have to go around three times. What a fantastic run, though – nine miles cross-country; it took me just over an hour up- and downhill. I didn't realise it at the time, but that was a good achievement.

The only time I'd miss my Tuesday nights at the club was when I found other runners to run with. For example, I found this Irish fella, Matt, and he could only run between 6 and 8 a.m., so I'd have to meet him in the morning. He was much faster than anybody else I'd run with on the track, and I was looking for somebody to push me on, so I'd run with him two or three times a week. They would be eight-mile runs and from the go it was fast. So I'd get to 3–4 miles and be knackered, but hanging on, and he wouldn't stop, he just kept going. Most of the time I didn't even know where I was, and I just had to keep him within my sight so I didn't get lost. Eventually that took my running on to another level.

I've often wondered if it's the same competitive instinct that makes me run and makes me play snooker. I'm pretty sure it is. It's not that I'm a bad loser but I don't like losing, and they are two different things. And with the running, it wasn't always about the winning, it was about how could I improve. Running taught me a lot about snooker as well. Even though the sports are so different, the tips I picked up running translated into the day job. In running, you could be a great trainer or

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a great racer, but you couldn't be both. What I mean is, you can't give your all to both. You either have to cut back on your training to be fresh for your races, or concentrate more on the training than the actual races. You'd get people flying round on a Tuesday night and you'd think they're unbeatable and they'd do the same on Thursday but come Saturday they've got dead legs. They'd still race, but they were well past their best by then. You had to leave a little bit in the tank in training: train your bollocks off Tuesday and Thursday but don't race Saturday; or train Tuesday, then go steady Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, and your legs are fresh Saturday and you'd have a good race.

Eventually I got 10 kilometres down to 34 minutes. I'd say anything under 36 minutes is decent club running, and this was 5.40 minutes a mile. I couldn't believe I was running that fast. Having said that, this is not great running: it's decent club running.

I learnt so much from the training regime and started applying it to snooker. If you run all the time you end up physically exhausted. I'd always thought you had to give your all to training in the build-up to a snooker tournament. Six hours a day for a month building up to, say, the World Championship. But the running taught me you can overdo it. Sometimes you can do half an hour, and that's just fine. The week before a tournament your practice should be done, and you should have started winding down.

I want to do it, I'm chomping at the bit, but the reality is it's not that good for you. Sometimes I wouldn't practise at all and just trust myself. Maybe a month before a tournament I'd put the hours in, but now the week before I just relax. A week before a marathon, runners will hardly run; they just do a mile or two or three to keep their legs ticking over. No more intensive stuff; that's already in the bank, and you've got to let your

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body recover. Then, boom! Whether you're playing well or not, now it's time to switch on and be ready mentally. As long as you've got a full tank to draw on, there's no point going to an event driving yourself mad and leaving your best form on the practice table.

The more I ran, the more obsessed I became. Now I had a new dream. I wanted to represent my county at cross-country. (To put this in context, my fastest at 10 kilometres put me in the top 1,500 in the UK, so I wasn't reckoning on an Olympic medal.) To do that you had to get into the top six in Essex, and I thought that was doable. I'd come 27th in my first year running, and I thought if I could just devote more time to it, give me two years, maybe three. But that was the problem. I couldn't devote more time to it. I was still a full-time snooker player and everyone in the game was telling me I was mad giving so much to the running.

I was doing a lot of road races – local ones within a 10- to 20-mile radius of where we lived. At one stage I was racing every other weekend, and running really had become the most important thing in my life. It was the only thing I talked about, yattering away on the phone every night.

'Alright, Alan?'

'Alright, Ron, how you doing?'

'Yeah, good. But not good enough. Got to get under six minutes. Getting there, I think. Fuckin' 'ell, I was done for by the end of my ten kilometres. Lovely out there, fresh, crisp, cold, but it killed me.' But I loved the fact that it took so much out of me.

I loved the routine. My mate would come over to me, we'd get there for 11.30, get dressed, ready for 12, ready to race at 12.30, timings done, shower, boom boom boom. In the pub for 3.30–4 p.m., just on the orange juice, focused, everyone

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talking about their time, the race, where they'd come.

It's funny that it became such a huge ambition to represent Essex. Let's face it, there was no money in it for me, and no status – you're not going to be remembered for having run for your county, are you? Certainly, I'd be better off concentrating on the snooker from a financial point of view. And yet still there was something pushing me on. I was desperate to do it. I began to think if I *did* represent Essex it would be the same as winning the World Championship. The running replaced AA and NA meetings in my life. There wasn't time for meetings, snooker and running. One had to give way, so it was the meetings. By now I looked totally different. I weighed 11½ stone and was down to a 31-inch waist. Everybody would go, you look really ill, and I'd think, great, that must mean I'm really fit. Then, when they said to me: 'You look really well', I'd think: 'Shit, I've put weight on.' I knew when I looked gaunt that I was in good shape and could run a good race. I'd be flush, I'd think, cor I'm flying.

In 2008 I was playing well and won the World Championship for the third time. I really was flying then. I'd beaten Ali Carter in the final, my daughter Lily was just over a year old, little Ronnie had just been born, I was world champion: life was good. About a week after the Crucible final I won my first race and I did it for charity. There were 150 to 200 people racing. When I was overweight and did it, I came about 100th. Middle of the pack.

This time round we got to the race in Epping Forest and my mate the mad Irishman's running. He was about 42, and he could run – about 33 minutes for 10 kilometres. He was a class act. I thought, there's no way I'm going to beat him so I just sat in behind him in about fourth or fifth. I thought, I'll stick on his shoulder and I did till mile two. After about two and a

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half miles I got in front of him and I thought, come on, you're in front, just push on. So I pushed on and pushed on and won it by 40 to 50 seconds. And I'd done five miles in 27 minutes. I couldn't believe it – the thrill of running through the tape, and winning £80 worth of vouchers. I was buzzing. Ecstatic. It was on the back page of the local Epping Forest paper. Me on the sports pages – and not for my snooker. I'd always wanted to make *Athletics Weekly* and I thought the only way I was going to do that was through running.

But that day in Epping Forest I peaked. I don't know why but it all went downhill from there. I'm still hoping it hasn't – that I'll get back and beat my PB. Maybe I just got a bit lazy. Maybe I didn't know where to go on to once I'd won a race. I suppose it was always going to be impossible balancing the running and snooker.

One of the problems was with Jo, my then partner and the mother of Lily and Ronnie. She always felt my running was selfish because she'd had two kids and was bringing them up and I was out playing snooker and running. She didn't like me going out racing, then she didn't like the mess I'd bring in – dirty running gear, dirty legs. Often I'd put my clothes on top of my clobber, run upstairs, get in the shower and wash all the mud off before she'd had time to complain about it. Running was probably one of the things that brought our relationship to an end.