

SEAN CONWAY

Britain's most inspiring maniac

Adventurer and "everyman" Sean Conway has just completed a triathlon of the UK by running the length of the country. He tells Howard Calvert how whisky got him through it

PHOTOGRAPHY:
CHRIS BROCK

"DON'T YOU DARE
COME NEAR ME
WITH THAT BRUSH"

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The first thing you notice about Sean Conway is his beard. It's a beast, an orange, swirling nest of hair extending from his face down his chest. A pair of blue eyes flash from beneath a red baseball cap, orange hair flowing out and combining with the beard. "When someone's around the same age as me and has a big beard, I get a bit competitive," he tells me.

I meet the adventurer on Hampstead Heath, where we go for a short run before discussing his recent 'ultimate' triathlon of the UK and, as the owner of a much smaller ginger beard myself, I cannot help but associate with that beard envy. To use a running metaphor, his is Steve Ovett in the 800m final at Moscow's 1980 Olympics, mine is last-placed Dave Warren.

This megabeard is the adventurer's calling card, making him instantly recognisable to fans as a kind of ginger Forrest Gump as he made his way on a run from John O'Groats to Land's End earlier this year. The challenge took 44 days, and the 34-year-old achieved it completely self-supported, finding food and shelter where he could along the way.

That competitive beard-growing spirit is also a part of what made the former photographer quit his job four years ago to live on an old Second World War boat and take up a life of adventure. "I decided to sell my business for £1 to just go out and try to push myself," he says. "I'm quite short, not very good at sport and I've never really done anything impressive. But it turns out, if you just put your mind to it, you can do anything.



TURNING OUT CYCLING THE LENGTH OF THE UK ISN'T ALWAYS BIKE-FRIENDLY



EMERGING FROM THE SEA ON HIS FOUR AND A HALF MONTH SWIM OF BRITAIN



HAVING FINISHED HIS RUN FROM JOHN O'GROATS

"I'M SHORT, NOT VERY GOOD AT SPORT AND I'VE NEVER REALLY DONE ANYTHING IMPRESSIVE"

It just depends how much you want it."

He began by cycling the length of Britain in 2011. Then, in 2013, having not swum for 14 years, decided to step things up several gears by doing something no one else had ever attempted: swim

the length of Britain. It ended up taking him nearly twice as long as he anticipated (four and a half months), and is documented in his entertaining new book *Hell And High Water*. He suffered jellyfish stings to the face (which is why he first grew the beard – to stop at least some of the tentacles hitting his skin), toes turning black and deadly rip tides. But he achieved the feat, and after that, completing the triathlon was inevitable.

"I'm just an everyman – if I can do it, anyone can do it," he says. "That was why I wanted to do the run in a way that anyone who wanted to do it could do it. As soon as you have support vans and sponsorship logos, most people look at it and think, 'There's no way I could ever do that.' Whereas anyone can go and buy a pair of trainers, a rucksack, get some maps and run. For the price of a package holiday you could run the length of Britain. All you need is four things to go well each day: food, water, sleep and muscle management. The key is to find the best of those."

RUN, FORREST

Conway is careful to distance himself from another breed of adventurers who "take life far too seriously". "They are hardcore guys who do hardcore things," he says. "My adventure was harder than your adventure, look at me with all my kit, I'm very serious. I didn't want that – I just wanted to have fun." Hence the Forrest Gump look... "I was watching the film about five years ago – before I'd even bought my first pair of running trainers – and at the point where he goes on the run, I thought, 'I like that philosophy.' He was running just because he wanted to run and explore. It became an easy metaphor for what I wanted to do. And it turned out I look like him, too."

This sense of getting maximum enjoyment out of his challenges is shown in requesting a playlist from his Twitter followers (his top three running tunes? Dropkick Murphys' *I'm Shipping Up To Boston*, Avicii's *The Nights* and Springsteen's *Born To Run*) and his love for whisky, which he fostered during the Scottish section of his swim. He claims two things kept him from quitting: the fear of failure, and whisky. "I had never liked whisky. I liked the idea of whisky: I live on a boat, I look like a pirate, I need to drink whisky or rum. But I hated it.

We reached Scotland on the swim, and two of my crew loved whisky, so I said, 'Right, by the end of this swim I want to love whisky.' So they proceeded to give me to give me every whisky they thought I'd like, and by the end I loved it."

The whisky flowed on the run, too, often during long evenings in local pubs refuelling (lasagna was Conway's No1 choice for carb-loading, followed by spaghetti bolognese, then chilli). "One night, I got chatting to a guy who owned the Clansman Centre in Fort Augustus, and he let me sleep there. He dressed me up as Mel Gibson in *Braveheart* in traditional outfits, which was fun. He'd had a few too many whiskeys, and all I was thinking was, 'I've got to go to bed – I'm knackered,' but for the next hour he was dressing me up and showing me swords."

PAIN BARRIER

Inevitably, the highs of yelling "They'll never take our freedom!"

were interspersed with miserable, wind- and tear-swept lows. Conway, who is a self-confessed "rubbish runner", says that he's never been on an adventure where he's been in physical pain all day, every day. He began the challenge averaging around 15-20 miles a day (building to 35 miles at the end) but, as Discovery Channel's documentary on the challenge shows, his knee and calf were giving him constant pain, and a few days into the run he suffered severe dehydration. "The idea of giving up was enough of a reason to carry on. It gives me panic attacks. I hate failure, I'm a bit stubborn. I fell off the rung before and know how that felt." That "falling off the rung" was his aborted 2014 attempt at the run after twisting his ankle while trying to take a selfie a week in.

"You'd be surprised how far you can push yourself. You don't know what to expect if you've never pushed yourself before, so people

give up. But if they'd pushed themselves further they'd have realised they could do it. There's a famous saying, 'The physical pain you feel right now will eventually go away. But the emotional pain of giving up will always stay with you.'"

But pain – and selfies – weren't the only hazards. "I also got lost quite a few times and ended up on busy dual carriageways with no hard shoulder. In particular, a section near Bodmin, the A38 – that was pretty hair-raising."

Despite this, Conway's advice to anyone thinking of doing the same as him is simple: just do it. "If you're unhappy in your job, there's no point in doing something that makes you unhappy. Life is too short for that. The idea of doing something you hate to earn money to buy the car you need to drive to the place you hate is just bonkers."

If quitting your job might seem a little extreme, there are

"THE IDEA OF GIVING UP WAS ENOUGH OF A REASON TO CARRY ON. I'M A BIT STUBBORN"

other options. "Adventurer Al Humphreys coined the phrase 'microadventures'; you work from 9-5, but you have 5-9. Make more of your weekends. It's a long time from Friday afternoon to Monday morning.

"Britain is a cool island," he adds. "And it's not that big. Scotland is almost half of Britain and people barely go above Glasgow. Some of the trails in Scotland were incredible – a lot of it felt like I was in Alaska."

Just make sure you avoid the A38 at Bodmin.

Sean Conway: Running Britain is on Discovery Channel, 25 June and 2 July at 9pm

GOODBYE, COMMUTE

OTHER EXPLORERS WHO QUIT LIFE FOR CHALLENGES

Alastair Humphreys
The ultimate diversion home – London via eastern Siberia. He completed a 46,000-mile trip on pushbike – over the Sudan; across the Andes; through Inner Mongolia. In 2008, he finished the 150-mile Saharan Marathon des Sables – with a broken foot. Not bad for a one-time school teacher.

Dave Cornthwaite
This explorer's feats are a work in progress – he recently completed his 11th journey for his Expedition1000 project (25 journeys of 1,000 miles or more on non-motorised transport). Last seen kayaking across Scandinavia, he quit graphic design to skate from Perth to Brisbane and paddleboard the Mississippi River.

Kenton Cool
Rather than repay his student loan, Cool (below) pursued a career in the Himalayas upon graduating. He's completed 11 successful climbs of Everest – with two in one week – plus the Lhotse and Nuptse peaks in a single ascent, meaning he attained the "Triple Crown" in seven days without returning to basecamp.

