

# TRIUMPH OVER TRAGEDY

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR INSPIRATION TO  
KICKSTART A NEW ENDEAVOUR THIS YEAR, LOOK  
NO FURTHER THAN **BO HEAMYAN'S EXCLUSIVE**  
INTERVIEW WITH EXTREME ENVIRONMENT  
ATHLETE **RICHARD PARKS...**



**R**ichard Parks spent his entire adult life playing professional rugby for a host of top flight European clubs and his beloved country, Wales; but his career was cut tragically short when a significant shoulder injury forced him to retire from the game he loved at just 31 years old.

Parks became disconsolate and depressed, shutting himself away in the spare room to entertain the darkest thoughts a man can muster at his lowest ebb. After much soul-searching and reflection, Richard eventually became inspired to channel his considerable talents into a new venture and came up with the idea of the 737 Challenge – climbing the highest mountain on each of the world's seven continents and standing on all three poles (Mount Everest being the 'third pole'), all within a period of just seven months.

After an incredibly intense two years of training, fund-raising and research, Richard Parks became the first person ever to conquer the South Pole, Mount Vinson, Mount Aconcagua, Mount Kilimanjaro, Mount Carstensz, the North Pole, Mount Everest, Mount Denali (McKinley) and Mount Elbrus within a time frame of six months and 11 days – two weeks ahead of the seven month deadline.

Since then he has taken part in some of the most extreme endurance events on the planet, including the Yak Attack (a high altitude cycle race in the Nepalese Himalaya); the Jungle Ultra (five marathons in five days through the Peruvian rainforest), the Brutal (a double Ironman event in North Wales), and the Tour Divide (a self-supported cycle race from Canada to the USA-Mexico border). He has also been on a number of expeditions to the Antarctic and, in 2014, became the fastest British person (and the first Welshman) in history to ski solo and unsupported from the coast of Antarctica to the South Pole.

Parks has become an ambassador for the Welsh Government, written an award-winning autobiography and helped to raise incredible sums of money for the Marie Curie Cancer Care charity. And now he speaks exclusively to Perfect Fit about his incredible story...



**IT MUST HAVE SEEMED LIKE THE END OF THE WORLD WHEN YOU WERE TOLD YOU COULD NO LONGER PLAY RUGBY...**

Playing for Wales was everything to me. When injury halted my career it really hit me. Rugby had played such a big part of me as a human; when it was taken from me, it really did feel like I'd fallen off the edge of a cliff.

**ALONG WITH AN INSPIRING QUOTE – 'THE HORIZON IS ONLY THE LIMIT OF OUR SIGHT' – YOU HAVE CITED SIR RANULPH FIENNES' BOOK MAD BAD & DANGEROUS TO KNOW AS BEING A KEY MOTIVATOR IN HELPING YOU GET THROUGH YOUR DARKEST TIMES. WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THIS BOOK THAT CAPTURED YOUR IMAGINATION?**

It was the stories of hardship, endeavour and adventure I guess. Reading his stories really captivated me and led me to [want to climb] mountains...

**HOW DID IT FEEL WHEN YOU GOT TO MEET THE MAN WHOSE WORDS HELPED YOU REDEFINE YOUR PURPOSE IN LIFE?**

It was awesome! I was really privileged to have Sir Ran's support all through my 737 Challenge. When I interviewed him it was less of an interview and more of us just catching up. An incredible guy. A true living icon.

**WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE THAT CLIMBING MOUNTAINS WAS THE WAY TO GO?**

The honest truth is I don't know. The emotions I was feeling at that time were so powerful and overwhelming that I wasn't really conscious of my decisions. With hindsight, I think I felt like I was at the bottom of a very dark hole and, to use a metaphor, I felt like I needed to climb out of that dark place and [so] projected that metaphor into climbing mountains. It was the scariest thing I could think of at that time and I needed that.



**BUT YOU DIDN'T JUST DECIDE TO CLIMB ONE MODEST MOUNTAIN, YOU DECIDED TO SUMMIT THE HIGHEST MOUNTAINS ON EACH OF THE SEVEN CONTINENTS IN RECORD TIME! WHY?**

I had no desire to pay a commercial company to short-rope me up the mountains or to run all my logistics for me. My life challenge – my goal – was to learn how to climb. I wasn't aware of the record when I started the project, I was just grateful and privileged to have the opportunity to attempt it.

**IN YOUR BOOK, BEYOND THE HORIZON, YOU SAY THAT YOU HAVE A 'PRONOUNCED MASOCHISTIC STREAK.' WOULD YOU CLASS YOURSELF AS SOMEONE WHO NEEDS TO FACE ADVERSITY IN ORDER TO FEEL ALIVE?**

I think we all strive for a life of contentment and fulfilment. But I enjoy pushing myself and I really value the personal growth that comes from stepping out of my comfort zone and challenging myself.

**YOU ALSO SAY IN YOUR BOOK THAT YOU BELIEVE 'RESILIENCE IS A TRAINABLE SKILL.' DO YOU THINK THAT ANYONE WITH A SIMILAR PHYSICAL ABILITY AND OUTLOOK TO YOURS COULD DO WHAT YOU HAVE DONE?**

I do believe that resilience can be trained, absolutely. Performance is part genetics, part application and part resources. I do strongly believe that it's our minds and our hearts that really hold the key to surpassing our expectations and achieving big things.

**DO YOU THINK YOUR MOTIVATION NOW DIFFERS TO THE MOTIVATION YOU HAD WHEN YOU FIRST DECIDED TO BECOME AN EXTREME ENVIRONMENT ATHLETE?**

The drive behind my 737 Challenge was [that] it was my way of exorcising the demons that had climbed out of a really dark period of my life. My motivation is different now. It's what I do; it's a job but it's a real privilege to earn a living through your passion and long may it continue.



**PERCY FAWCETT (A FAMOUS BRITISH EXPLORER OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY) ONCE SAID THAT HE WAS ALWAYS ITCHING TO EMBARK ON A NEW EXPEDITION WITHIN A WEEK OR TWO OF RETURNING HOME. ARE YOU THE SAME?**

Each project is different. Antarctica was a really intense development cycle and a really intense project. It was 14 really brutal months to prepare for it and the expedition itself really emptied me psychologically I think, as well as physically. After that particular one I needed the best part of ten months off to rest and recharge. Whereas other expeditions, I've come home and I've literally wanted to climb within a week.

**YOU'VE JUST COME BACK FROM COMPETING IN ONE OF THE MOST GRUELLING CYCLE RACES IN THE WORLD, THE TOUR DIVIDE, AS PREPARATION FOR YOUR NEXT BIG 'WORLD-FIRST' EXPEDITION. WILL CYCLING BE A FEATURE OF THIS YET-TO-BE ANNOUNCED PROJECT?**

As a sport I love cycling; I love the hardship that comes from it and I guess it's the biggest component of my cardiovascular work. It's painful but it's really low impact... [so] from a health point of view it's a really good way for me to keep doing what I'm doing. But no, the project is a climbing one.

**CONTINUING WITH THE CYCLING THEME: WHICH WAS THE TOUGHEST BIKE RACE TO COMPETE IN, THE TOUR DIVIDE OR THE YAK ATTACK?**

If I had to pick one then it would have to be the Tour Divide. It's hard! I averaged 12 hours 22 minutes' cycling every day and that's not including resting. To do that for 25 days – and I was bottom of the top third of the finishers – puts it into perspective how tough it is. And there are so many other things you have to manage: you have to navigate; you have to manage your equipment, you have to sleep on the side of trails, you have to manage your food intake. Ultimately [it's] an event that's the same distance – and more climbing I guess – than the Tour de France.



**IF, FOR SOME REASON, YOU WERE TOLD TOMORROW THAT YOU WOULD NO LONGER BE ABLE TO CONTINUE BEING AN EXTREME ENVIRONMENT ATHLETE, HOW DO YOU THINK YOU WOULD DEAL WITH IT?**

Obviously it would be a really difficult pill to swallow. But, having been where I've been, and having experienced the things I've experienced, I know that I would cope.

**WHEN – IF – THE TIME COMES TO RETIRE FROM BEING AN EXTREME ENVIRONMENT ATHLETE, WILL YOU GET SOME SATISFACTION FROM THE FACT THAT, THIS TIME AROUND, YOU'LL BE ABLE TO QUIT COMPLETELY ON YOUR OWN TERMS?**

Yes! I think transitioning after any chapter of our lives, whatever we do, can be challenging, but having the foresight and having a certain amount of control helps that transition.

**IF YOU COULD GIVE YOUR YOUNGER SELF – OR INDEED ANYONE IN A 'DARK PLACE' – ONE BIT OF ADVICE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?**

I think that our lives are like seasons and we all have good periods and we all have challenging periods but the things that are constant – are the things we can control – are our attitudes and our experiences. Savour and enjoy the good times, because the tough times won't last.