

what happens when you don't even know what went wrong?



UNFINISHED BUSINESS

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY HILARY MATHESON

WHEN ELLIE GREENWOOD'S NAME COMES UP IN CONVERSATION AMONG ULTRA-RUNNERS, IT CONJURES UP IMAGES OF A SPEEDY YET PERPETUALLY CHEERFUL BRIT, TEARING ALONG TRAILS AND ROADS WITH DETERMINED FOCUS. SINCE HER ULTRA-RUNNING DEBUT IN 2008, GREENWOOD HAS TWICE HELD THE TITLE OF 100KM WORLD CHAMPION, AND SHE HAS GONE ON TO HOLD SEVERAL COURSE RECORDS, INCLUDING THAT OF THE AUSPICIOUS WESTERN STATES 100 (WHICH SHE'S WON TWICE). Of all her races and accomplishments, however, her historic win for Britain at the Comrades Marathon in 2014 stands out as her personal favourite.

Noting that the 56-mile race has been run for more than 90 years, Greenwood feels that Comrades' rich history and the strong field of more than 16,000 runners it attracts creates the perfect competitive environment. "If you truly want to run with the best of the best," she says, "then that to me is where the competition is at."

Having raced three times at Comrades throughout her career, Greenwood was headed back there in 2016 to tackle her "favourite race in the world" once again. But as she finished one of her strongest training blocks ever in preparation for the challenging course, injury struck. She hopped on a plane to South Africa anyway, hoping desperately that last-ditch physio and rehab efforts would allow her to

race – but to no avail. She was forced to watch from the sidelines, returning to her adopted hometown of Vancouver BC with many questions and few answers.

Greenwood has spent the 17 months since that Comrades disappointment battling the elusive but constant injury that sidelined her so suddenly (despite her most vehement protestations). Any runner will tell you that injuries suck – and that's when you have some idea of the diagnosis and prognosis. But what happens when you don't even know what went wrong? And when even the most diligent physio and constant visits to various sports-medicine doctors yield few answers?

For someone like Greenwood, who is used to cranking out 100-mile training weeks consecutively without thinking twice, having her running come to such a jarring halt didn't just impact her racing – it left a giant hole in her life, schedule, and day-to-day sanity. While cross-training certainly helps with sanity in the short term, Greenwood soon found that "my dedication to cycling and hiking waned as it seemed that I was going to have to spend forever doing these 'replacement' activities". Some people seem to transition from sport to sport as injuries or interests dictate, while others quickly realise that their passion for one sport doesn't make them an athletic chameleon. For Greenwood, running is more than just

a sport – it's her driving force, and one doesn't just give that up without a fight.

As Joni Mitchell sang so eloquently: "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." I swear she wrote this line just for runners, because it seems that as soon as we are injured we develop an immense appreciation both for our health and the ability to throw our running shoes on and head out on an adventure whenever the mood strikes. Being injured has given Greenwood a newfound appreciation for simply being able to run, no matter the pace. "Before this injury," she wryly notes, "I would grumble about a slow pace on a speed workout or having not got the vertical gain I wanted on a long training run. Right now I try to just be grateful for what I can do, and for what I have done in the past."

This simple statement packs a punch. It's easy for any of us to look at what we've done in the past, whether that be winning 100-mile races or finishing half-marathons, and think that just because we "were" able to do it, we should "always" be able to continue doing so. But there's a season to everything, including our ability to do the things we love the most at the level we might expect from ourselves.

Time isn't infinite, and the one constant is change. If there's anything Greenwood has taken away from her long and drawn-out

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battle with the dreaded Injury monster, it's that ultra-running is a privilege, not a right. When she's battling through the lows of her races, Greenwood often reminds herself that: "We choose to do it, and we get to run in some magical places and meet some pretty awesome people. And if we can't appreciate that even when we twist an ankle during a race or start vomiting... well, I think we've lost perspective."

For Greenwood, perspective is everything at the moment, and simply running – forget racing, for now – is enough. She still has what she calls "a racing 'to-do' list that's longer than my 'done' list", but injuries sometimes have a way of forcing

us to slow down and distill things to their very essence. Thankfully, the same stubborn fight that has carried Greenwood to so many victories extends to the rest of her personality as well... and acknowledging defeat is simply out of the question. So for now, unfinished business remains, but baby steps suffice. One at a time, and each glorious step spent running instead of walking is indeed a privilege and not something to ever be taken for granted.

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