

# Into the deep end

What if you could flick a switch that took you from self-protect mode to self-explore? Business owner **Ryan Stramrood** used endurance swimming to catapult his company to the next level



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW BRAUTESETH, DAVID MERRON

Most of us live inside the confines of a box, where a steady job and a moderate level of risk exists. Why? Because it's comfortable. And the mind is designed to keep us safe. But it's often more overprotective than it should be – and it could be holding us back from all that exists outside the box.

When the owner of Stramrood Connect, an advertising agency, Ryan Stramrood nervously signed up for his first swim squad 19 years ago, he was a self-confessed couch potato who could barely manage 20 lengths of the pool. He wasn't a superhuman athlete, by any stretch of the imagination. Fast forward to the present and his achievements include a solo swim across the notorious English Channel, the first official 'ice mile' in Antarctica, and the world's first swim around the southernmost tip of South America. At the time of writing, he's preparing to attempt his 100th Robben Island crossing. Stramrood does all his cold-water swimming without a wetsuit.

The 45-year-old Capetonian shares the lessons endurance swimming has taught him about

aiming high in business, taking risks and the importance of teamwork.

**GQ: What did hitting the wall during your English Channel crossing teach you about your capabilities?**

**Ryan Stramrood:** Death is a real outcome in extreme conditions. Because pain, panic and fear had accentuated my self-doubt, I believed my body was finished. And yet, I still managed to swim for another four and a half hours in rough, cold conditions. I'd done an endurance sport and managed to carry on, even though in my mind it had seemed impossible at the time.

I began to think of times in business when I'd convinced myself I'd reached the endpoint. For example, when I'd believed a target was too high. Now, I view the curveballs and red tapes of the corporate world in the same way I would a body of ice water.

**GQ: How do you prepare, physically and mentally, for swimming in such dangerous conditions?**

**RS:** The real danger is when you

get out of the water; warm blood rushes back to your extremities from your core, which means your core temperature drops. Regularly sitting in ice baths conditions my body to cope with these circumstances, but it also helps my mind to understand the processes that are happening in my body.

**GQ: You swim in the choppiest, coldest water, sometimes at night. That's hardly playing it safe. Has this made you more confident about taking risks in your own business?**

**RS:** I run a small advertising company, which is an outsourced sales solution. Before I started swimming, I would shy away from pitching an account I believed was geared toward a much bigger organisation than mine. I'd think, "Why would they choose me?" Now, I go in balls to the wall and I fight for it. Often I fail; sometimes I succeed. But every time I learn. If you don't try, then you've already failed.

**GQ: You're a business owner, father and an endurance swimmer. What's the secret**

**to fitting it all in?**

**RS:** First and foremost, I compromise in favour of spending time with my son. Then comes my full-time job – which involves international travel because I'm also a public speaker – followed by 12-14 hours of swimming.

**GQ: Swimming is a solo sport, but you can't do the endurance swims you do without solid support. What have you learnt about teamwork?**

**RS:** If you think you're doing everything yourself, you're wrong. When I was swimming the one-mile distance in Antarctica, I hit the wall at around 25 minutes [the total time Ryan spent in the water was 32 minutes]. I felt like everything was shutting down. That's when I realised my team had become my umbilical cord. They were sitting a metre and a half away from me on a rubber duck, making eye contact, clapping and giving me the thumbs up. Without their support, I would've lost confidence and pulled out, as death seemed imminent.

It's easy to take that into business. Yes, you need someone brave enough to be the leader and to put themselves in the danger zone; but if you don't have support, you're only operating at 50%.

**GQ: How has swimming changed your outlook overall?**

**RS:** There were only two outcomes for me in Antarctica: either my core temperature would warm up in Antarctica, or Antarctica would cool me down. It's taught me about where the endpoint is in your head. Just on the other side of that, there's a margin, and if you're responsible enough to play on the other side of that line, you'll accomplish and learn so much more. That's where the magic happens.

Swimming has taken me from couch potato to standing on a stage in front of thousands of people, telling them my story and helping them to change their mindsets.

✕ – LISA ABDELLAH

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