

# Epic Bill Bradley on Success and Failure

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Failure is never easy. When it is public failure, it can be even harder to handle. There are few things more public than DNFing during a race. Six years after DNFing at Ironman Austria I still have to take a deep breath before talking about the experience. For Bill Bradley his first DNF at Ironman Canada was much the same.

"I remember heading out of town as fast as I possibly could," he admits. "I changed flights, packed my stuff and bolted because I just couldn't stand facing all of those finishers knowing I was not one of them."

Boy how things have changed.

Five years ago after hitting hard times, filing for bankruptcy, losing his house, his business and his wife, Bill wallowed in self pity for a little while. Then he picked himself up, found a new avenue to happiness and plunged into the world of ultra. Not just ultra running but ultra everything.

As a first step Bill ran a fifty miler and like any good ultra-distance athlete, he thought, "If I can do that, then I bet I can do even more." Since that first 50 miler he has run 270 miles through Death Valley in a double Badwater. He has completed the Virginia Triple Ironman, the Ultraman and ridden across America.

What I find most impressive though are the challenges he has not finished and how he has moved past them. When I spoke with Bill on Thursday afternoon he was still licking his wounds from his second DNF at Arrowhead 135, a 135 mile race through Minnesota in temperatures that plunged to -35 degrees this year. It was hard to believe that I was speaking with a man who had just DNFed out of a race that he had been been training for for a year.

Bill, spoke a little about how difficult the course was, how hard the conditions were and how fast the cutoff times were but what it always came back to was what he needed to do to go back next year and finish.

This is the same attitude he has used the past two years as he has attempted and failed to swim the English Channel. First let me say that Bill did not start swimming until he was into his thirties. His whole life he has been afraid of cold water, dark water and choppy water but he took on a challenge in which he would have to jump into cold, dark, choppy water and swim 23 miles. The first two times he failed because of seasickness. Though he had trained in choppy water he had not taken into consideration the affect the swells would have on his body. The third attempt, which was just four days after the second attempt, was better and he got closer his previous to attempts but was pulled back into the boat because of hypothermia.

But he isn't deterred. He already has his slot booked for this year. He knows what he did wrong and how he can correct that this time.

For Bill that has become the point. He could take on challenges he was guaranteed to finish but he doesn't believe he learns anything from those experiences. He chooses to take on tougher challenges knowing he may fail. Instead of letting his ego get the best of him and worrying about whether people think he is kidding himself to be taking on such enormous challenges he goes head first into the challenge. If he succeeds like he did at Badwater and the Ride Across America, he moves on to something more challenging. If he doesn't?

"Well, I sit around and mope for about eight hours," he says jokingly, "and then I go back and find people who have succeeded and try to figure out what I can improve for the next attempt."

Failing is hard. Endurance athletes are not built to quit. Three days before I went to Austria for the Ironman someone asked me what I would do if I couldn't finish. I didn't even know how to answer that question. That wasn't an option. In the end maybe that was my biggest mistake. As much as I needed to prepare for the race, to train my body and mind to cross that finish line, maybe I should have worked at least some on a DNF plan.

Bill has a plan. He goes in the race fully expecting to finish but he also knows that if he doesn't, he will regroup, retrain and return the next year.

Written by Ann Brennan



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