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(Intro Music)

Robert Glazer: Welcome to Elevate, a podcast about achievement, personal growth and pushing limits in leadership and life. I'm Robert Glazer, and I chat with world class performers who have committed to elevating their own life, pushing the limits of their capacity, and helping others do the same.

Lenox Powell: This episode was previously recorded and published on the Outperform Podcast

Robert Glazer: Welcome to the Outperform podcast. Today's quote is from ultra-marathoner, Dean Karnazes. It is, "Run when you can, walk if you have to, crawl if you must, just never give up."

Our guest today, Alex Hutchinson, knows a thing or two about running and never giving up. In addition to having competed as a middle and long distance runner for the Canadian national team, he's also the author of the New York Times bestselling book, "Endure: Mind, Body, and the Curiously Elastic Limits of Human Performance."

Robert Glazer: Alex, welcome. It's great to be talking with you today.

Alex Hutchinson: Thanks, Bob, it's great to be here.

Robert Glazer: Well, to start us off, tell us a little bit about what type of runner you are.

Alex Hutchinson: I'm a middle distance runner, which means when you hear about hardcore runners, you see them, they're running marathons or ultra marathons, or whatever the case may be. I will make the claim and the case that you can be just as serious a runner running 5Ks as marathons. You can pack all the suffering of 26 miles into 3.1 miles, if you so choose.

So yeah, I was a competitive, a miler and a 5K runner in college and beyond. These days, I'm in my early 40s now. I run mostly 5Ks, 8Ks, 10Ks, that kind of thing. I have run a marathon just for the record. But mostly I kind of like the 15 minutes is a good time-efficient form of suffering to me.

Robert Glazer: I'm scared to ask, but what's your 5K time?

Alex Hutchinson: My best time back in the day, which was ... what was the day? The day was about 15 years ago. I ran 13:52 for 5K.

Robert Glazer: Wow. Well, that's about a third of what I do. So I have room for improvement. What got you into running in the first place?

Alex Hutchinson: I've been a runner most of my life. I think my first cross country race was in grade three in elementary school. I was on the cross country team, not every year, but throughout in high school. I started to get more serious when I was about 15 and started training year round and kind of got hooked.

For me, it was probably initially a competitive outlet. I ran because I was good at it and I liked competing hard. It was only sort of over the course of time and of years that it became something that I did not to compete, but because I enjoyed it.

In fact, it was probably not until I had a serious injury in my early 20s and couldn't run that I realized, oh, actually I kind of miss running. It's no longer I'm just suffering through in order to compete. It's actually something I do every day that's a real part of my routine and that has all sorts of mental and physical wellness benefits.

Robert Glazer: Do you have a favorite place that you like to run?

Alex Hutchinson: Yeah, not to give you my whole life story here, but I'm talking to you from Toronto. I'm talking to you from the study in the house where I grew up. So about four years ago or maybe three years ago, my wife and I moved back to Toronto and the timing was good, my parents were ready to downsize and move to a condo.

So I'm living in my childhood home, which is the place where I first started to run. So the Humber River which is about a block and a half from my house has about 20, 30 miles of trails in either direction from me.

No traffic lights, it's just a beautiful, wooded ravine with deer and other wildlife down there. So that's where I started running when I was 15 and that's where I run most days today.

I've lived in a lot of different places, so I've had a lot of temporarily favorite running routes, but none of them matches this. Basically for farther than I can run, I will not hit a traffic light.

Robert Glazer: That's nice.

Alex Hutchinson: Depending on the time of day, I may not see many people at all. It's very peaceful and I've come to appreciate the importance of natural spaces too in my outlook and just my general sense of wellbeing.

Robert Glazer: Interesting. I wish I had quieter places to run, but I'm in more of a urban suburb.

Alex Hutchinson: Yeah, you can't just choose to live in the middle of wilderness just so you have quiet runs. So there's always trade offs and I've had great places to run in ... I lived in New York for a while and Central Park is great. Big cities like Washington DC are great.

One thing I will say is that every place I've lived and I've, I don't know, lived in a dozen places, ever since Google Maps came on the scene, I would always when I was moving to a new place, I would get on Google Maps and try to get a sense of, okay, I know I want to triangulate between where I'm gonna be either going to school or working. Where there's decent shopping and where there's some green spots on the map so that I can find places to run. 'Cause you can be strategic about these things.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, well, congrats on all the success of your book, "Endure." I really enjoyed it. It came at an interesting time for me. I was finishing my own book and was working on sort of a chapter on mental versus emotional endurance. Also was getting ready to do this 24 hour, overnight bike ride from London to Paris. So it was very interesting reading the theories that you had and then playing around with that.

The book is about our ability to increase our endurance. I'd love to ... based on the research just at a high level, how should someone first go about thinking about that or about actually taking the steps to increase their endurance?

Alex Hutchinson: That's a great question and I think I'm gonna answer it in a couple of different ways.

It's specific to the task you're thinking about. If we're talking strictly about physical tasks, let's say it's biking for 24 hours. One thing I really wanted to make sure I emphasize when I talk about the book is the book is mostly about the mental aspects of endurance. Which is I think a very broadly applicable idea.

That when you're pushing to your limits, whether you're pushing to your limits, whether you're trying to push yourself. Whether it's in a marathon or in the context of a work or professional or personal situation, that there's a lot of commonalities in what it takes to push your limits and to push through to another level.

However, I'm very wary of seeming to say that it's all in your head and that if you want to bike for 24 hours, you just have to be tough. So first, step zero in improving your endurance is if it's a physical task, it's improving your physical

endurance. It's getting stronger, it's getting fitter, it's doing the training. There's no mental shortcut around the physical obstacles that you're gonna encounter.

Once you've done that, then there's still a whole lot of roll for learning to push yourself. With whatever physical fitness you've gained or physical endurance you've gained, then it's still a question of how much are you gonna be able to squeeze out of yourself?

I think that's where you see big differences between people. So I come from a running background, as you sort of mentioned. Anyone who's ever trained with a group of people will know that you can have a bunch of people who do all the same workouts and seem to be in the same shape and doing the same things, but in a competitive situation, some of them will be able to push themselves way, way, way harder than others. Those are the people who end up winning the races and getting the most out of themselves.

So I think that's the kind of skill that it's harder to quantify or just give an exact recipe on how to develop. That's what the book explores is how do you push as close as possible to your limits?

It took a whole book to talk about it, but if there was one simple thing to say, I would say, "Making yourself uncomfortable and getting used to that is the best way of getting better at being uncomfortable and learning to tolerate that sort of discomfort."

Robert Glazer: Let me ask you something 'cause we ... I don't think you talked about this in the book, but it's something I've talked about a lot. So being uncomfortable is so important. How does that fly in the face of a lot of what you see?

Maybe you've looked into this or not, but the kind of helicopter parenting these days. Which is really about making people more comfortable and removing obstacles. Is that showing up in sports or aspects of records in terms of endurance? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Alex Hutchinson: I have thoughts. I don't know if I can back them up with science. But I'll tell you, every time I talk to one of my old coaches, people who have been coaching athletes for 20, 30 years, especially younger athletes, high school athletes or university athletes, they have a lot of thoughts about this.

Of course, we're all potentially guilty of the, "Back in my day, kids were tough and we used to ..." The uphill both ways and all that sort of stuff.

But I've heard from a lot of different people that kids have a lot more trouble handling unexpected adversity. If everything's going right, they've been going to their various extracurriculars since they were two years old and are well-trained and smart and creative. But handling the unexpected and handling it on their

own is a challenge. They're constantly looking for much more support from other people.

I don't mean to make this sound too negative 'cause of course, drawing on your community and your family and your friends and looking for support from other people is great. It's much better than suffering in silence.

But I do think in order to really be able to develop those skills, that resilience, that ability to handle the unexpected, you have to fail sometimes. You have to be thrown curve balls that you can't hit and that's how you learn to get a little better at it.

Robert Glazer: Well, we had a speaker actually on the podcast, Erik Kapitulik, and he did some training for our company last week. He has this phrase, which he said to our whole company. He said, "Look, it's not kids these days." He's like, "There's nothing wrong with the kids."

He does a lot of training. Says, "It's the parents I don't like."

Alex Hutchinson: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: "They're the problem." He goes, "It's not the kids. The parents are the ones setting the rules and not holding them accountable." So I think it's an interesting perspective on where that resonates from.

But one of the things that you and I did debate via email is I was kind of asking this question, I was trying to solve something about where to put this chapter in my book. But this chicken and egg thing of physical and emotional resilience, which comes first? Do we need to physically do something we can do? Do we need to emotionally break through to get there physically?

It's a very fine line, but I know you had some sort of thoughts on this. We know it's a virtuous cycle, but which wheel spins first?

Alex Hutchinson: I think probably it depends a little bit on the person. There may be some people who are strong as an ox, but scared of the least bit of discomfort. There may be other people who are mentally tough but not fit. So there may be differences.

But to me, it's easier to challenge yourself physically. If I want to challenge myself physically, all I have to do is sign up for the local 5K and see how fast I can run it. Challenging yourself mentally or emotionally is a much more complicated thing. There's in a sense much more self esteem at stake. What is the generic challenge? Get your girlfriend to dump you? It's much harder to standardize that sort of challenge.

Whereas there's this easily accessible world of physical challenges that is gonna test you and it's gonna come along with some mental or emotional challenge as part of the package. But it happens in this very separate area.

If you don't run a good 5K, it doesn't mean you're a bad husband or a bad coworker. So you can kind of compartmentalize it, use it as a test area to develop these skills and then apply them in the rest of your life.

Robert Glazer:

Yeah, it's interesting. One of the things that you write about in the book is how science has evolved from thinking that your body has absolute physical limits, to the brain acting more as the regulator to either shut things down or keep it going. So it's a perfect combination of these two.

Can you talk more about what you found in the research in that? And some of the examples you found in that?

Alex Hutchinson:

Yeah, I mean again, as a runner you're always thinking about why can't I go faster? What's holding me back? As a guy who was curious about this stuff, I was always reading books to try and understand whether is it my VO2 max? Is it my leg muscles? Is it my strength? Is it my heart? My cardiovascular system? What is it that I need to improve in order to get faster?

In a sense what I've realized in retrospect is that there's this whole paradigm of the body as a machine. That just like a car, you can understand when the car runs out of gas, that's when the car stops. And that there should be some sort of analog in humans that when we run out of a certain type of fuel or when our heart rate is ticking over at its maximum rate, that those are the limits.

That was basically what the 20th century was all about from a physiology perspective. There was huge progress in understanding all the parts of the machine. But there was also the realization that somehow it's still not the whole story. You can know everything about your physical parameters and still not know who's gonna win a race.

So in the last 20 years, there's been a push to say, "Well, if you want to understand limits, you can't just sort of tack on the brain as an afterthought. You have to understand how the mind and the body are interacting together to define your limits."

So there's been a ton of research and the overall message ... and still very controversial, so I want to acknowledge that. That it's not anyone agrees that we have the final answer. But the overall message that I get from the research is that the ultimate thing that matters most when you're pushing your limits or that defines your limits, is your perception of how hard something is.

So it's not that there's one particular signal that says, that's it, you're done. Your heart rate is at this point or your breathing rate is at that point. Or your body

temperature's that point. And that signals you're done. Instead, it's how your brain interprets all those different signals.

The reason that's important is because if the ultimate dictator of endurance is your perception of effort, that means there are other things above the neck that can affect your perception. Like your mindset.

So that's when where some of these concepts that are popular these days come in and can be quantified and you can say, "Look, change the words in someone's head. Change them from negative self talk to positive self talk. And we can measure the improvement in their endurance and the difference in their perception of effort as a result of those things."

So you take someone who's very skeptical like me as I want to quantify everything before I believe it and you show them those sorts of studies. And you say, "Okay, now I believe that all those motivational talks that I ignored when I was 22 and thought I knew everything about physiology." Now I'm like, oh, that's real. That wasn't just kind of like a nice idea. There's really physiology behind the idea that your perception and your mindset really matters.

Robert Glazer:

You had some great examples of that in the book. Including when the four mile mark fell, suddenly more people started to do it over the next few years. Presumably 'cause they knew it was doable.

Or also how runners somehow seem to find in the last lap or the last mile, when they didn't think they had anything left, they're able to pull out something in the last mile because they know it's the end.

Is that sort of aligned to that?

Alex Hutchinson:

Yeah, totally. I mean the four minute mile is definitely the paradigmatic example of a barrier that was certainly physical in some ways. But was also mental. So that for 1000s of 1000s of years, no one's ever run a four minute mile. In 1954, Roger Banister finally does it. And six weeks later, someone else does it.

The next year, a few other people do it. It's not like the dam broke and all the sudden everyone could do it. It's still hard. I say that as a guy who's ... my personal best for 1500, which is the metric equivalent of the mile, is officially equivalent to four minutes zero point zero two seconds for the mile. So that's a barrier that I was always trying to break and I didn't.

So I have a lot of respect for the four minute mile barrier. But there was definitely some degree of this idea that once you know someone can do it, then others are willing to set their sights at that point.

But the thing you raise about the pacing I think is even more fascinating, to be honest. It's this is that if you go to any local road race and watch, stand at the

finish line, you'll see all these people kind of jog around the corner, see the finish line, and then start sprinting. And you're like, "Oh, dude, you could've run harder the whole way. Look at all that energy you had left."

You feel like it's a pacing error. But then you do an analysis of the pacing in world records. Every world record at distances like 5K and 10K, over the past century and you see that everyone did that. They all sped up in the last kilometer. The greatest runners in history on the greatest day of their lives.

That shows you that it's not a pacing error. These guys are the best. It's something deeply wired in us that you can't ... there's some energy in there that you can't access until when you're not sure how far you still have to go. Once you get close to the end, you know, okay, the danger's passed. Then you're able to dig into that.

So one of the sort of great challenges then is learning to access those reserves before you get to the finish line. Rather than just leaving it to the final sprint.

Robert Glazer: Is there something in that about if you're designing something's hard to do. If you have a hilly course that you should run the downhill first so that your mind gets confident? Rather than doing the hardest part first?

If it's about the perception of what's ahead, don't you want to sort of start with a good feeling? Rather than starting with a bad feeling?

Alex Hutchinson: Yeah, or instead of maybe trying to trick yourself, one of the I think really powerful things is to get familiar with the course. So wherever the ups and downs are, the turns, the more familiar you are with them, the less your brain is trying to protect you from the unknown.

I think, not to get too metaphorical here, I think that's something that can be generalized to other areas of life. Which is that we tend to be most worried about the unfamiliar. And that's when you're gonna be most cautious. Often for good reason. If you don't know what's coming, it's a good idea not to be totally, spend all your money, without knowing when the next paycheck comes.

But in a racing context, if you can jog the course, if you can walk the course, if you can look at the course map. You can run the course in advance. The more familiar with it you are, and there's some research that shows this, the better you're able to push. The more you're able to lay it all out there. Because you know exactly how far you still have to go. So I think that's maybe the practical message to take from that.

Robert Glazer: What's a situation where your resilience was put to the test? In other words, what is your endure moment?

Alex Hutchinson:

In some sense, every race I ever stepped to the line, you have a point where you're pushed to your limit. But the one that sort of jumps to mind for me is maybe really one of the hardest things I had to face. I don't know, it makes my life sound easy.

But one of the hardest things that I had to deal with was that I got a stress fracture in my lower back and it was three months before the 2004 Olympic trials. I had more or less put my life on hold for ... I made the Olympic trials in 1996 as a 20 year old. As a young hopeful and I thought I would have a lot more chances.

Then I had a bad knee injury four years later and I missed the 2000 Olympic trials. I had to make a big decision after 2000 of do I get on with my life and just do other things? Or do I try and come back from this injury and take another crack in 2004?

I decided to take another crack and try and come back in 2004. So I spent those four years building up to that moment. Finally was in probably the best shape of my life in early 2004 and yeah, three months before the Olympic trials, I was running at 10 mile race and about seven miles into it, I heard a little crack. It was my sacrum, which is a bone in the lower back snapping.

So that was the bad part. Then the question is, how do you respond to that bad thing? Other than crying. At that point, I knew I wasn't gonna make the Olympics. There's no path back to the Olympics. The recommended recovery is 10 weeks with no running at all. And I'm 12 weeks out from the Olympic trials. So I'm not gonna make the Olympics.

What I decided that I wanted to do is to ... and I knew this would be the end of my really serious running career. But I decided that I wanted to go out fighting and go out running a race that I could be proud of and not just give up in the face of adversity.

So during those 10 weeks that I couldn't run, I probably trained harder than I have ever trained at any point before or since in my life. I did a couple of hours of pool running every morning.

Now pool running for those who've had the good fortune never to encounter it, it's basically you get in the water and instead of swimming, you assume a running motion. So you're basically dog paddling going nowhere. So it's extremely boring, but it duplicates the motion of running, so it's the most efficient form of cross training for running.

So I was doing that for 90 minutes to two hours every morning. And doing it hard. Then in the afternoon, coming back and going on the elliptical or the exercise bike for another 30 to 60 minutes.

Really, really mentally tough. But as a result, even with 10 weeks of no running, I maintained my aerobic fitness. I came out of the pool and started jogging about two weeks before the Olympic trials. I went to the Olympic trials and I made it out of my semi final and qualified for the final. I think I came ninth, if I'm remembering correctly.

Which had improved on my ... when I was young gun in 1996, I had come 11th, I think. So I improved by two spots.

So anyway, long story short, it was an extremely challenging situation for me. It was sort of the end of my life's dream. But I'm really proud of the way I responded to it and was able to walk out and say, "Yeah, I was an Olympic trials finalist one more time."

Robert Glazer: All right, Alex, that was an incredible story. One more question before we take a break, related to that. But I've been curious about the concept of emotional endurance. You mentioned before getting outside of your comfort zone.

Is there a similar process to sort of physical training that people can follow to increase their emotional endurance? That's more systematic? Or is it really about just getting yourself out there?

Alex Hutchinson: Yeah, I mean there's been a bunch of really interesting research trying to understand how people build tolerance to discomfort. It's a complicated area and there's a lot of things going on. But there's some really interesting evidence to show that the more you suffer in training, the better you get at suffering. So the better your performance becomes and the better your ability to tolerate other forms of discomfort.

So there's neat studies where they design a training program ... or two training programs that give you exactly the same physical results, but do it either in a way that requires really intense, painful, uncomfortable exercise. Or that's pretty just sort of relaxed and takes longer, but it's no discomfort.

You get the same physical changes and fitness, but the people who do the uncomfortable training perform better and are able to also do better at transferring that ability to other tasks. So that they'll do ice bucket tests or whatever to assess their ability to handle other forms of discomfort. It does transfer.

So to me, what that tells me is that yeah, it's kind of a direct result of putting yourself in uncomfortable situations and that that's not ... one thing to clarify is that it's not that you dull your nerves or anything like that, that you don't feel the pain anymore. What that helps you do is develop psychological coping tactics.

So you're able to distract yourself from discomfort or to reframe challenging inputs in a more emotionally neutral way. That's to use the sort of jargon of mindfulness to be non-judgmentally aware of yeah, my legs hurt right now, but that doesn't mean I have to panic or anything like that. It's just a signal telling me that I can't go on forever.

So I think the most effective thing you can do, as opposed to trying to come up with a magic mantra or anything like that, is just to make sure you're pushing yourself out of your comfort zone on a regular basis. Experience that and accept that and embrace that, so that you'll get better at it.

Robert Glazer:

Yeah, I think there's a corporate analogy to that. I was at a leadership training session last year with a friend of mine who's a ... Connor Neal from, well he's Irish, but he lives in Spain. He teaches a public speaking session. It was a very hurried session where he gave people limited instructions and asked them to prepare these speeches and get ready in a couple hours.

Everyone was freaking out and fighting him on, saying they didn't understand the instruction. He said, he got up in front of everyone, told them to sit down. Said, "Look, my job is to make the practice really, really hard, so that when you have to give an impromptu speech or someone asks you to do this or whatever, it's not a big deal. We want the practice to be harder than reality."

The whole room stopped and everyone then went back to work and delivered great speeches. But he said something that a lot of people kind of know, but don't internalize, which is of course you'd want practice to be harder than reality. That way, as you said before, it's about versus our expectations of how hard it will be.

Alex Hutchinson:

Exactly. I had a sort of similar experience with there's this idea of brain endurance training. That you can run a better marathon by systematically building your brain endurance and there's ways of doing that. You can set up these cognitive tasks on a computer where you're just sitting there for an hour or 90 minutes tapping away at a keyboard based on what shows up on the computer screen. And it builds your mental endurance.

There's some interesting studies from the British military actually showing that this enhances your physical endurance too. That again, showing the tight connection between mental and physical endurance.

But anyway, I was trying this out for a Runners World article. I was gonna do 12 weeks of brain endurance training before running a marathon. I was supposed to be working up to like an hour or 90 minutes a day. My first session, it was like five minutes or I was doing five minutes at a time of these little games.

I emailed the researcher and I was like, "It's okay, right?" Instead of doing like a 15 minute session of one of the games, I did five minutes each of each of the three games. 'Cause otherwise it's just too damn boring."

He emailed me back and he said, "No, that's not okay. The whole point is they're supposed to be hard. Don't find ways of making them easier. You're doing this thing that's supposed to be hard to train you for doing hard things. You should be seeking opportunities of making it hard."

He made the same point about, hey, if you have a long day at work, don't cry that your workout after work is hard. Just say, "This is great, this is extra mental training. Having to get through the mental fatigue while I do my workout." Rather than just everything feeling easy.

Because the more things feel easy in training, that doesn't prepare you for the reality of how hard it is when you're actually trying to perform.

Robert Glazer: No, absolutely. All right, we will be right back with Alex after this quick sponsor break.

Adam Grant: Hi, I'm Adam Grant. As a warden psychologist, I've spent most of my career studying two big questions. How do we unlock original thinking? And build cultures of productive generosity?

With those questions in mind, I recently co-founded a pretty extraordinary community dedicated to discovering groundbreaking ideas while trying to make the world a better place.

It's called The Next Big Idea Club. Together my friends Malcolm Gladwell, Susan Cain, Dan Pink, and I search far and wide for the eight most original, most essential nonfiction books of the year. We send them straight to you.

We also interview the authors and we send you the key insights across video, audio, and text formats. Remember, this is a book club. So when you join the exclusive online forum, you get the chance to discuss every season selections, not just with other members, but also with me, Malcolm, Susan, and Dan.

Robert Glazer: Get insider insight from Dan Pink, Malcolm Gladwell, Susan Cain, and Adam Grant and sign up for The Next Big Idea Club today at www.nextbigideclub.com/10off. And get 10% off your subscription.

Speaking of [healio 00:28:19], Alex, the team included your book, "Endure" in their book club selection earlier this year. Malcolm Gladwell actually gave it a rave review and wrote the introduction.

I heard you tell an interesting story about how you came to know and became friends with Malcolm and I'd love it if you could share it with us today.

Alex Hutchinson: Yeah, first of all, I was exceptionally lucky and exceptionally grateful to Malcolm for the support he gave to the book. It's kind of a funny story the way we first interacted.

He had written a piece, I think it was in the New Yorker, questioning the whole anti-doping in sports paradigm and thinking about the concept of enhancement in sport and raising some questions I guess in the way that Malcolm likes to do.

I wrote a piece, first in Runners World and then I wrote an op ed in the New York Times where I quoted from that piece and called him out on it. He actually emailed me and so I was like, wow, there's an email from Malcolm Gladwell in my inbox. And I was like, oh, man, he's gonna be pissed. I didn't think he would ever actually see what I wrote.

But it was totally, exactly how I would hope I would respond to anyone disagreeing with something I'd written. He was interested, he wanted to clarify his position, find out more about what my position was. We exchanged some emails just talking about it and it was totally ... it was great.

'Cause he's raising questions and I too was sort of raising my own questions about his questions. After that we kind of kept in touch, not super regularly, maybe a couple times a year we would exchange thoughts. 'Cause we're both big track fans and so we have some real common interests. Of course I'm a big fan of his writing and have been for gosh, I guess almost 20 years.

Anyway, the story sort of goes on in that I guess a couple years ago, or it must be three years ago, something like that, he was giving a talk in Toronto at the University of Toronto. And a friend of mine was going and he said, "Oh, you should come and I can get you in."

So I was able to go see this talk of his. Afterwards I went up and just said hello and I said, "Hey, Malcolm, you know what? My friends and I are doing, we do a regular kind of hard run every Saturday morning in this cemetery in midtown Toronto. If you're looking for running company when you're in town, come and join us. 9:15 and at the tombstone to the left of the door or whatever."

He did, he came and ran with us, and it was a lot of fun. He's an amazing runner. He's like a five minute miler in his 50s. That sort of cemented the connection. So then I decided to screw up the courage and just say, "Hey, any chance you'd be willing to take a look at my book?" And he was totally gracious.

So it all comes of ... the moral of the story is criticize Malcolm Gladwell in print and good things may happen.

Robert Glazer: Well, I think it's also a good example of being authentic, but then being respectful. I mean you weren't afraid of calling him out on it, but then you had a respectful dialogue.

I think this is obviously why you never want to burn a bridge. People can disagree and actually build respect through disagreement, but if you write a fiery email off, you can often never get that back.

Alex Hutchinson: I think the recommended approach is first you write the fiery email-

Robert Glazer: And then you save it.

Alex Hutchinson: And you say what you ... and then you delete it. Say, "Okay, I got that out of my system." Because it is easy. Especially when I'm writing about other people's ideas, especially if I'm writing critically about other people's ideas, I mean look, it's easy to make someone look stupid. Especially with you pick a few selective quotations and if you make some good jokes, you can be a jerk about someone. And it's funny.

I read when other people do that and I laugh. I have the temptation to do that myself and I try and avoid it. Like you said, this is a good example of why. 'Cause I could've been really critical. I could've tried to make Malcolm look silly. Not that I would've necessarily succeeded, but I could've tried. I could've been mean about it.

Instead, I was just like, "I'm not sure I agree with what Gladwell wrote here. Here's what I think." That led to a situation where I think we both had an interesting discussion.

It's one thing writing about it, it's another thing on social media where everyone has an opinion and some of them are quite abrupt and to the point. It's always tempting to reply and just try and ... especially when someone makes a mistaken assumption or makes a mistake, to really shut them down and say, "Hi, see what an idiot you are."

Sometimes I do that by accident, but ... or not by accident, but sometimes I let myself do that. But for the most part, I really try to just remember, hey, if someone says something wrong, I can correct them without making it into a war between me and them. I can express my opinion without starting a war.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. It's just a good learning. I publish a lot, I write a lot of articles, they're on LinkedIn. People jump in and respond where obviously it's not even about them. And you know, "This is the dumbest bleeping thing I've ever read."

And I'm looking at this being like, if I worked at this person's company, I would really just not trust their judgment anymore. In terms of their willingness to jump ... it might feel good in the long run, but I just think it's a really ... I mean in the short run, but I think it's a really silly short-sided thing to do in the long run.

Alex Hutchinson: Yeah, and I'll tell you, when someone has ... she comes out firing from the hip to tell me what a total moron I am, I click on the link. I'll say, "Who is this person?"

Where do they come from?" I don't want to make it sound like I sit here on my computer all day, drawing up an enemies list.

But I am interested and if they're from a company, you can find out a lot about a person with like 10 seconds on Google. And you're like, wow this person is with such and such a company. I mean I've had articles where I've written critically about technology in the fitness space. Then there's some random guy will be like, "What a dumb article, blah, blah, blah."

I'll Google the guy, I'm pretty good at Google, you know? I find out hey, this guy's a consultant for the company I was criticizing. He was trying to do it below the radar, but you know what? I can get past that by Googling your name, figuring a few things out.

So yeah, I do agree. You gotta think about not just what's the right thing to do as a human, but what's the right thing to do strategically?

Robert Glazer: Well, you and Gladwell clearly bonded over running and you're also both prolific writers. I was actually fascinated to see that you started your career as a physicist, I think it was. So I'd love to hear the fork in the road that led you on a path to journalism and writing from starting as a physicist.

Alex Hutchinson: Yeah, it mystifies me a little bit too when I look back and I try and remember what was that train of thought? How did I do that?

So yeah, I did a PHD in physics over in Britain and then I did some post doctoral research with the National Security Agency in Maryland based at the University of Maryland. So I was in my late 20s working as a physicist and kind of on the path to a physics research and academic research career.

But it just wasn't ... when I think back, I can remember the sort of sensation of working some pretty long hours. Being in the lab til nine, 10 at night. Then coming in the next morning and having a coworker say something like, "Hey, Alex, did you see that article about such and such a thing in Physics Today?"

Me thinking, "Are you kidding, dude? We were here at the lab til six hours ago. The last thing I wanted to do when I went home was to flip open Physics Today. Of course I haven't seen that. I don't even subscribe."

A few of those sorts of moments made me stop and think, those guys have a real passion for it and I find it interesting. I had a good time in physics and I think I could've been happy as a physicist, but I didn't have the same passion that some of my better colleagues had.

So for me it was really about ... and these thoughts were happening around the same time that my running career was sort of hitting its final stretches. Where I was like, okay, I'm not gonna go to the Olympics.

I realized, okay, for a lot of my life, I've been able to channel my passion into running. I've been working as a physicist, but my passion has been running. And that's not gonna be the case in my 30s, 40s, and beyond. I'm gonna have to ... running is no longer gonna be the sort of be all and end all.

So I want something in my life and it would be perfect if it could be in my career, that can be my passion. So I was thinking a lot about that. I didn't really know a lot about journalism, to be totally honest. I hadn't studied it, I hadn't worked for student newspapers or anything like that.

But it seemed like the kind of place where there'd be scope for following your passion. To be honest, reading stuff by people like Malcolm Gladwell was one of the sort of catalysts of, "Oh, journalism isn't just who had a car accident last night." It's also, "Here's some interesting ideas. How do they change the way we think about how humans interact?" And so on.

So I had this feeling that it could be a way of chasing whatever ideas I had passion for and that could change along with me. That what I have passion for at 35 might be different than 45 and 55. And journalism would allow me to pivot in different directions as my life evolved.

So I took a big leap. I was starting to consider this and I applied for some sort of internships and things like that and didn't make a lot of headway. What I finally realized is that it wasn't gonna happen just on the side, that I needed to dive in the deep end with no flutterboard and just see if I could swim.

So that's why I left my post doc at the NSA, applied to grad school to do a masters in journalism when I was 28. Went and did that just to sort of see if I could do it.

That's kind of the short version of the story. Obviously it was a very long process and evolution of thinking that made it happen.

Robert Glazer: Well, sounds like you made a good choice in the end. But you weren't writing about physics. So you combined the writing passion with your personal passion.

I know you talked about the getting through that injury before. But for most people, writing a book is also a test of endurance. I think when we chatted before via email, you mentioned writing "Endure" was longterm project.

So I'd love to hear a bit about your process to get through the whole writing of "Endure." You said it was over a fair amount of years.

Alex Hutchinson: Yeah. When I look back through my emails, I think 2009 is when I started telling people that I wanted to interview, "I'm writing a book about endurance. Can I come and visit your lab and suck up a bunch of your time?" I'm sure a lot of

those people gave up by around 2014 thinking, "What was that doofus doing? There's been no book."

So one thing that I was able to do was to work on my daily journalism which paid the bills, or my regular journalism in parallel with the book and have it overlapping. So once I decided that I wanted to write a book that really explored what are the limits of endurance? And how do we push them? I was able to write articles for Runners World and for Outside and for other magazines.

Where I was like, "Send me to South Africa and I'll go visit this lab. Or send me to Britain and I'll check out this scientist doing this cool research." And even aside from trips like that, just on a daily and weekly basis, write article after article about new studies coming out about endurance.

So all this time, I was kind of building, in my head I was working on the book. But I was getting paid for that, which is not a minor thing, to be honest. I have a wife and two kids and my wife was in school at the time. So I didn't have the option of just hibernating for 10 years with no income.

So I was lucky that I had good editors who were willing to let me chase these stories. But at a certain point ... and I kept sort of waiting until I knew everything about endurance to write my book. After sort of six or seven years, I realized it's never gonna end. There's not some final answer that I'm gonna get to.

Alex Hutchinson:

So at a certain point I have to just stop doing more research and digging up more threads. I have to actually write. That was the real hardest part of the book and I would say that was about ... actually, you know what? The sticking point that sort of delayed me for about a year was trying to figure out what the book should be about. 'Cause I had this ton of information about how it should be structured.

So it took me probably close to a year before I settled on a structure. 'Cause I had to create a book proposal to send to my agent to send to publishers. So that's sort of maybe 5000 to 8000 words. The hardest part of that was figuring what is the chapter structure gonna be? What do I want to say? Where do I want this book to start? And where do I want it to end?

That took a long time. And then writing the book itself, I budgeted a year for it. I probably took more like 18 months. The cliché is you just have to get your butt in the chair and that took a lot of time too.

Robert Glazer:

Shortening it is the hardest part. Right? The Mark Twain quote.

Alex Hutchinson:

Yeah, well, I mean you had that email on the art of brevity not too long ago. And it's like, yeah, I struggle with that all the time 'cause I do a lot of writing for online now. So a lot of my writing for outside magazine is for the website rather than print.

When it's print, it's like there's 1000 words and 1050 words is not appropriate because there's no room on the paper. So there's a real discipline to that.

But what I've noticed is now that I'm online, I'm like, well, I can always fight. If they think it's too long or too complicated or too digressive, come on, it's just pixels. Who cares? But you realize if you have a certain amount of things to say and you take longer than you need to to say them, you lose people.

So it's a discipline that I'm sort of fighting with 'cause it is easier to write long, that's for sure.

Robert Glazer: All right, last question that we love to ask everyone. On a personal note, what's a mistake or failure that you've learned the most from? You can pick personal or professional.

Alex Hutchinson: I guess I would actually return to a theme I was sort of talking about earlier. I think a big, big thing for me was not making the Olympics. There's a cliché from everyone who's in an endurance sport or any sort of sport, that it's a metaphor for life and you learn from the successes and failures.

For me, there was a real kind of step wise progression where every time I broke through to a new level, I would initially fail at that level. My first time at nationals, my first time qualifying for the national championships, I just ran like crap. I was overwhelmed by being there.

Then the next year I came back and was ready to compete at that level. So there was the sense that you fail and that helps you succeed. But eventually that comes to an end.

So for me, again, it was the 2004 Olympics or Olympic trials rather, realizing okay, this is it. There's no I come back in 2008 and this time I make the Olympics. It's like, I took my shot and I'm gonna have to wrestle with this fact that I devoted a really, a good decade of my prime years to where totally focused to try and make the Olympics and I didn't do it.

As I said, this was around the same time that I was wrestling with what I was gonna do with the rest of my life. Whether I would stay in physics, whether I'd do something else. In a way I think what was important for me was the realization, as I accepted that the Olympics were not gonna happen, that to my surprise I realized I was totally okay with it. That I didn't have any regrets.

I had spent a year and a bit in my mid 20s not working, just living with my parents, being a bum. Running full time, trying to make that work. So I had really put a lot into running.

There's sort of two schools of thought on that. Some people are like, "That's so cool. You were chasing your dreams." Then there's other people like, "Wow, what a waste of time."

What I realized is that I had zero regrets about having put everything into trying to make the Olympics. Sure, I would've liked to make it, but it was totally worthwhile being all in on something. Trying to pursue something with a worthwhile goal that made all the effort and sacrifice worthwhile.

So that's what I think provided me with the nudge that gave me the courage to say, "Yeah, I'm gonna try ... I'm gonna go into journalism because I can envisage that sort of career working out in a way that is worth chasing even if I don't make it."

Again, coming back to the failure idea. What I realized with journalism is that ... and by learning from my experience with trying to make it to the Olympics, was that I could embark on a really hard quest and more or less be satisfied and consider it a good decision even if I didn't succeed.

That it wasn't all about failure. That being embarked on a worthwhile mission can still be fun even if you don't make it.

The truth is, things have worked out better than I could've ever hoped as a journalist. But even if I was still ... well, I don't want to judge other types of reporting. But even if I was covering car crashes and stuff, which is not what I sort of really enjoyed as much. That it would be worthwhile because I was trying to pursue something.

Because there was a worthwhile goal at the top, I was totally willing to accept the risk of failure. I think that's what I learned from failing to make the Olympics.

Robert Glazer: That's a great answer and I think people will take a lot out of that. So thank you for sharing that.

Alex, I really enjoy your research, your writing, and your perspectives around endurance and fitness. Thanks so much for taking the time to chat with me today.

Alex Hutchinson: Thanks, Bob, it's great to have a chance to talk about these things in a larger context and see how they draw connections to other parts of the world.

Robert Glazer: All right. For those of you listening, thank you for tuning in to the Outperform podcast. We will include links to Alex's book page, along with an interesting book interview he did with Malcolm Gladwell in our show notes. And other resources that you may find helpful.

Until next time, keep elevating.