

ONE WOMAN, 214 LAKE DISTRICT FELS,

# WHERE

FOUR ATTEMPTS, ONE RECORD-BREAKING

# THERE'S

WAINWRIGHTS RUN

# A HILL



# SABRINA VERJEE



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# WHERE THERE'S A HILL

**SABRINA VERJEE**

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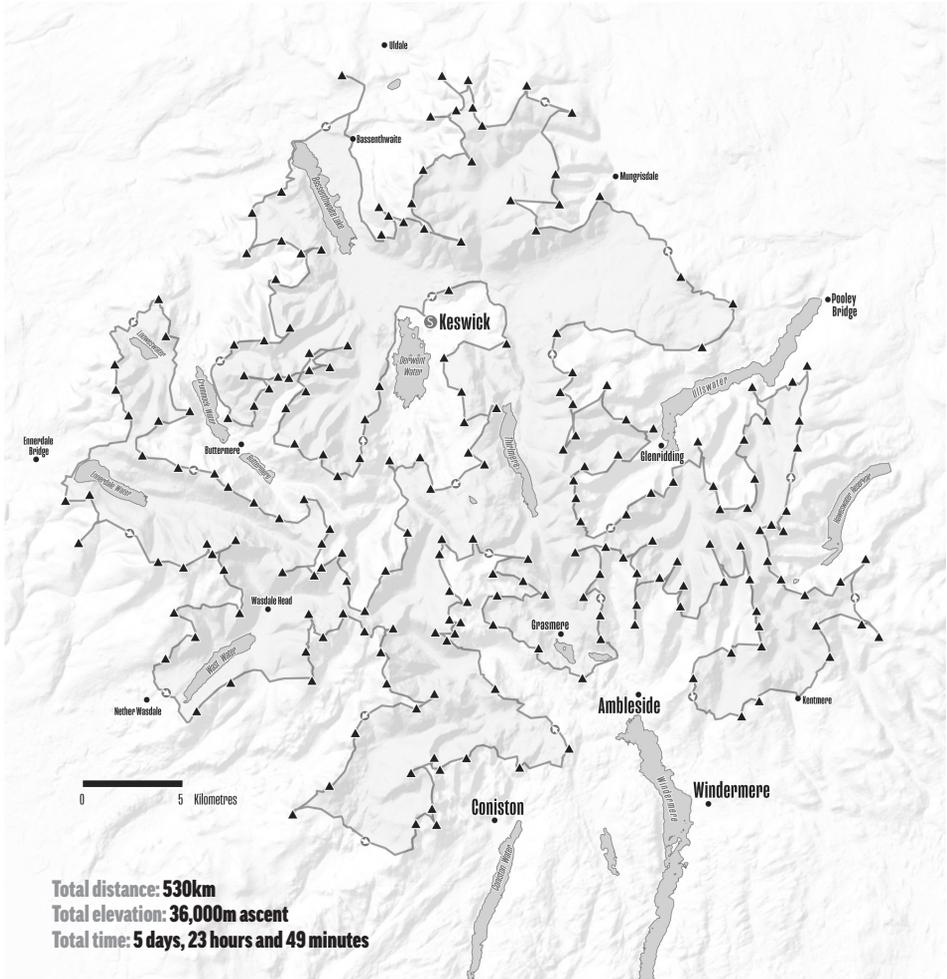
To my support team – you're the best!

From the bottom of my heart, thank you to each and every one of you that gave up your time to help me. From the first attempt to the record-breaking round, you all had a part to play. I have wonderful memories of the times we shared together in the hills and support points and I will cherish these forever.



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The route Sabrina took in 2021 when she set a new record for visiting all 214 Wainwright summits in one continuous journey on foot.

# ONE

## DON'T COME LAST

I was not a natural athlete. In my early school years I was terrible at sports. All of them. I went to a primary school called Danesfield where, twice a week, we went outside for sports lessons, usually on the hard-surface playground. Most commonly we played netball, but in the summer months there were games of rounders too. I had barely touched a ball in my life until I went to school. My parents had no interest in sport whatsoever and my first and only opportunity to play any was in these twice-weekly school sessions.

It seems unthinkable now but the teachers thought it appropriate to select two children who would then get to pick their own team, and there were usually three of us left over at the end who didn't get chosen at all. We had to sit on the bench and watch the other kids play. The difference was that while I was desperate to join in, the other two hated sports. Even worse, the teachers went down the list in alphabetical order, so I never even had the chance to be the captain, given how low in the alphabet the name Sabrina is. Silly parents. Why couldn't they have called me something more useful, like Anna?

This is one example from many of how my early schooldays were a bit miserable. Just as I was left out of official sports, I was also left out of the

informal playground games the other children occupied themselves with at lunch break. I never understood why I was excluded. I was a quiet child but also confident. I would go up to a group of children playing and ask if I could join in, but they would say no and never seemed to have an explanation as to why not. So I amused myself. I would go to the edge of the playground where there was soil and trees, and I would look at the insects and play with the twigs and spiders on my own. In the end, I decided that lunch break and playtime were quite boring, so one day I went back into the classroom to sit at a desk and do my homework. When a teacher discovered me doing this, I got a severe telling off.

‘Homework is to be done at home!’ she yelled at me. ‘Go back out to the playground and play!’

I knew I was different from the other children, but never really understood why. As an adult I do look back and wonder if it had anything to do with the colour of my skin. I remember when another ‘brown’ child came to our school and it seemed to be a big thing. Especially when he decided to do a poo on the school lawn. I suppose I thought people treated him differently because of that behaviour rather than his colour. I felt sorry for him. He was treated like an outcast. I would have made friends with him but he was two years below me. Other than us two, my school was all white. There were eighteen girls in my year and only three boys. And one of them wanted to be a girl. I liked him. He was kind and quite funny but didn’t like playing sport, so I was always annoyed when they picked him to play on the netball team instead of me. He didn’t want to play and I did.

It can’t have been easy for my parents being immigrants in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s, but they presented themselves simply as two hard-working people who minded their own business. My mum, Christine, is French. She was in the UK from a young age but I’ve always found it hard to extract the facts about her childhood. I know she went to a French lycée in London to study. I also know she had to leave school early to look after my grandmother, who was mentally unwell. She lived in a flat in central London, where my grandfather was the boss for Lancôme.

My mum has blonde hair and blue eyes, so I would I say I look more like my dad. Mum met my dad, Azad, when she was sixteen and they were

both working at a grocery store. He was ten years older.

Dad was born in Nairobi in Kenya. His great-great-grandfather, together with his great-great-grandfather's five brothers, left India in 1886, travelling from Bombay in a dhow. They arrived in Mombasa and established a business there connected to the migrant labour building the railway. Dad came to Britain to study for his A-levels but dropped out and instead became a chef in a restaurant. I think my French grandfather must have been a bit racist. He disowned my mum when she wanted to marry 'an Indian'. I suspect, though, there was more to it than that. I think Mum was his favourite daughter and he didn't want to let her leave. She had two younger sisters who she looked after as well. And despite initially turning his back on her, when my sister was born, my grandfather eventually accepted my mum's decision to marry my father and they had a good relationship after that. My mum was indeed still the favourite.

Dad speaks Gujarati fluently but has still never been to India. I got him to teach me a bit of Gujarati when I was little and I think I could count and say a few words, but I've forgotten it all now. He was very upset when, having read our children's version of the Bible, I told him that I didn't think God existed. He would say he is an Ismaili except he drinks alcohol, eats pork and never goes to mosque. My dad is sweet and empathetic, the most huggable person I know. He's also the tallest in the family, at five foot six, with my sister and me vying for shortest at around five foot two.

My sister, Natasha, is a couple of years older than me. By the time she was born, my parents were living in a flat in the corner shop they'd opened in the Surrey village of Hersham, close to Walton-on-Thames. This would have been in the late 1970s. By the time I was born, two years later, they had moved to their own house in Cobham, where they still live. When my sister was a baby, my mum spoke to her in French, but then my dad complained that when my sister started talking he couldn't understand her, so he banned French from the house. I always think it is so sad I didn't get to learn French when I was little; it would have been so easy for me at school. Instead, I had to learn it the hard way, like all the other children. That's the main reason I rarely tell people that I am half French, because naturally they expect me to speak the language like a mother tongue and I can't. My sister, who now

lives in Denmark, is extremely gifted in picking up languages – not just French but also Danish, German and Italian.

My sister was definitely better at sport than me when we were young. She actually had some ball skills. She played netball and is pretty good at tennis. She would get bored of playing tennis with me because I was so bad, and would wander off, even though I was enjoying myself. When we were younger and had family over for barbecues or Christmas, I was always the shy, introverted one. I'd disappear off into the woods for a little adventure on my own to escape the 'family'. I found it really intimidating to have these relatives round that I didn't know that well. I never had anything to say to them. Natasha was such a chatterbox that she loved it. She was generally a very amiable person and had lots of friends at school.

I've been called a 'Paki' a few times in my life. As a kid, that really confused me, because not only did I not know what a Paki was but when I asked my parents to explain they told me that I was not Pakistani but half Indian and half French. I thought my dad was Kenyan. When a teacher at school had asked me where I was from, I told her 'Surrey'. When she probed a bit more and asked about my dad, I told her he was from Kenya. Then she became confused as to why I was brown and not black.

Many years later, when I was working as a locum vet in Luton, a white couple came in with their cat. They were drunk and having a domestic. In fact, they got so angry they were scaring their cat, so I asked them to wait outside. I treated their cat and gave it back to them and thought no more about it. But some weeks later, the company I was working for asked me to respond to a complaint. It basically accused me of being a Pakistani and of stealing a British person's job. There was nothing there about the work I had done or my communication with them. It was simply that they hadn't paid the bill and wanted an excuse not to. I didn't know whether to be more shocked by the racists who wrote the letter or the person who had asked me to respond to it.

As a person, I embrace everyone, no matter where they are from, what their sexual orientation is, what religious beliefs they have or what they do for a living. I completely ignore hierarchy and status. To me, all people are equal. I then judge them on how they behave, although I am getting better

about being more forgiving when people behave in ways that I don't agree with. I think I am this way because of my multicultural background and because I don't feel I have a skin colour I identify with: I'm just a person. I do wish that I had more of a cultural identity so I had a sense of belonging to a 'group'.

I was lucky that I had a stable family life. My parents worked hard but I think they were happy. My sister and I would often sit in the car outside the shop, waiting for them to finish work. They served a community of people and so I think they were accepted, but I wonder what impact being disowned by her father had on my mother. It tells you something about her resilient nature: her stubbornness, thick skin and ability to thrive even when everything around her is trying to drag her down. I still call my parents' home 'home'. I am very lucky to feel so at ease when I'm with my parents, despite us being worlds apart in what we enjoy doing. They are the most amazing comfort blanket. I do think that my confidence, self-belief, independence and ability to risk failure are down to them. They never put pressure on me to be anything; they only ever want me to be happy and have no expectations.

Sometimes, though, I wonder if my motivation to achieve comes from a desire to make them proud or attract their attention. I remember when I was a child I would hear other parents bragging about their children, how talented they were, and I'd be thinking that was weird because I was better than their child at that particular thing but my mum never said those things about me. I would come home with various trophies, for things like being the best at maths in my class, and the trophy would just be kept in my bag and barely acknowledged. There was definitely more focus on the things I wasn't so good at, like swimming. The number of times as an adult I have had to sit and relive the experience as my mum and sister giggle describing the fiasco of getting me into the pool. I had to put a nose-clip on, earplugs, armbands and a rubber ring, and even then I was terrified. It's quite funny now that I'm actually quite a strong swimmer, having learnt quickly when I started modern pentathlon at Oxford.

I think I would have hated school if it weren't for my academic abilities. As it turned out, I was actually very good at maths and English, and best in

my class at most things. Unfortunately, having done all the work I'd been given, I'd then get bored while all the other children were still working at it. I would then start being 'naughty' and get in trouble. My entire school career was a mixture of praise for my academic achievements alternating with being scolded for my naughtiness. The teachers didn't know what to do with me, so decided to put me up a year to be with children a year older than me. They also did this to split me up from my first and newly made friend, who was, apparently, being corrupted by my misbehaviour. So in this new academic year I had no friends. On top of that, I was getting relatively worse in the sports department since I was now competing against children a year older than me. I had been the shortest child in the class I'd just left, so you can imagine the difference. My parents would come to sports day begging me to not come last in just one race. My best effort was third from last in the egg and spoon race. At least that got them off my case.

The following year, my new class reached the end of primary school. I should have gone with them to secondary school but I was only ten and none of the secondary schools wanted me. I was too young. Great! What to do now? The teachers decided it would be best for me to repeat the final academic year. So now I was back with the children in my previous year group, except now they hated me even more for being a clever clogs. There was no point even trying to make friends any more.

Secondary school wasn't much better. Once again I found myself in and out of the headmistress's office, alternating between being congratulated for winning a prize in a poetry competition and being told off for writing a rude poem about a teacher during class. I wasn't happy. I found it hard to make friends and although I enjoyed my academic work, I also wanted to be outside doing sports. I learnt to play tennis but was quickly excluded from the school's elitist club because I simply wasn't good enough. 'Only the best girls will be able to play tennis,' I was told.

I thought of the twin sisters in my year who ran the 400 metres. Running sounded like fun. Maybe I could do that. There was a grass athletics track on the school playing fields with white lanes painted round the oval 200-metre circuit. Once a week in summer we had a 'track session', which was timed for a 100-metre or 200-metre run. I remember being very slow

to get off the start. In the first second, I seemed to be five metres behind the others and my chest would close up on me. I literally couldn't breathe. As the first girl crossed the line, I was still only halfway. What was wrong with me? The 200-metre races were slightly less embarrassing. I would still have a slow start, but right at the end I would be starting to close the gap. True, I'd still finish last, but I could at least produce a result that was worth recording. I thought to myself that if the race were longer, I would have more time to catch up.

I loved being outside. At some point my mum decided she preferred to work on her own, and so it was more often Dad who did the daily parenting. Playing with dollies was forbidden and if caught we'd be sent outside to play in the woods, where we would make shelters out of branches and bracken and play imaginary games, like pretending we owned our own riding stables. We would role-play booking clients for lessons and then pretend that they were arriving and that we'd help them choose a horse and teach them to ride.

This fantasy stemmed from our experiences at the local riding stables. With our parents so busy at work, it was handy for them to drop us at the stables, where we would work mucking horses out, bringing them in from the fields, turning them out to grass, grooming them, tacking them up for wealthy clients, polishing the leather tack afterwards and sweeping the yard. My sister and I would graft all day long during the holidays and weekends, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. We were the most diligent, hard-working kids. And we loved it. We were rewarded for our labours with 'free rides' on the ponies. We had our favourites, and mine were always the fast and frisky ones. I would often fall off, since the badly behaved horses would rear and buck. The reward of a more dangerous ride was the thrill of speed. Natasha preferred the safer rides and it annoyed me when we went on a hack if I had to wait for her slower horse. Then again, she would laugh at me when I fell off, although as the older sister she always took care of me. Sometimes we'd have to catch and retrieve my pony, which wasn't always easy. If it took a while, we would arrive back late to the yard, sometimes at dusk and without lights. We had such fun at the stables and for my parents it was free babysitting.

The yard owner would put pressure on us to get there as early as possible so we could get the horses ready for lessons. We were happy to oblige but my dad never liked getting out of bed early. We would ask him the night before if we could please leave at 7.30 a.m. and he would say, 'Okay, but you have to bring me a cup of tea to my bedroom to wake me up and then you need to do the household chores.' The list of chores grew longer and longer. It started with emptying the dishwasher, but the next week we were also raking the leaves off the lawn and sweeping the drive, then on top of that we were combing the tassels on the sitting-room rug, a job I hated since it seemed so pointless. We knew Dad was just trying to keep us busy in the morning so he could have a lie-in.

Looking back now, I realise my poor father was just exhausted. He's not always had the best of health, but as children we couldn't understand why he wouldn't get out of bed when all he had to do was drive us to the stables. We were getting up earlier and earlier to get the ever-growing list of chores done just so we could go to the stables to provide more slave labour. It's quite funny in retrospect. Health and safety these days would never allow children to do the things we did. We had so much freedom and independence. Once we discovered how to cycle properly and were bought two good mountain bikes, my sister and I could ride to the stables ourselves and no longer had to rely on our dad. I think we would have been around twelve and fourteen years old at that point. I loved cycling. It made me self-reliant. Until then, because our house was a few miles from Cobham village centre, we hadn't been able to reach any shops on our own.

When it came to choosing my A-levels, I was very disappointed to be told I couldn't do chemistry or biology as I'd only done the dual award science for my GCSE option. I discussed the situation with my parents and suggested I might be better off going to a different school. And could I please go to boarding school? I investigated the different options and decided I liked the look of Charterhouse in Godalming, a very prestigious school. In those days, Charterhouse was more or less boys only, but they allowed up to twenty-one girls in for A-levels to pull up the school's grades. I convinced my parents it was a great idea. They wouldn't have to chauffeur me to and from school or the train station, which I knew annoyed them.

They agreed that if I passed the admission test they would give me their blessing.

Charterhouse changed my life. Instead of being excluded, I was automatically included in groups. As girls we were divided into two boarding houses, or 'digs', where we slept in our first year. During the day we were part of the boys' boarding houses: three girls in each A-level year group. Mine was called Hodgsonites. In the morning we attended chapel where we sang hymns. I loved singing. I would learn the words and sing as loud and as well as I could. The choirmaster approached me one morning and said he could hear my voice and that I was talented and should have lessons. Being a cynical teenager, I thought he just wanted some more work: my parents would have to pay for these lessons. But I wanted to try and see if it was fun. I was too nervous to make a sound and suggested I might be more comfortable whistling. So we started with that. Gradually I found my voice and eventually went on to sing in some solo competitions on stage in front of lots of people. Despite my fear, it was good to push myself and my confidence grew.

I was also actively encouraged to do every single sport imaginable. I learnt how to rock climb on the school's indoor climbing wall. There were house teams for hockey, basketball, mixed lacrosse and football, and whenever an extra team member was required, I would step in. I knew I wasn't very good, but no one seemed to mind. Playing football, I discovered that while I still didn't have any ball skills, I could be quite useful at defence. I would sprint from one end of the pitch to the other, trying to intercept the ball, and could just keep going for the full ninety minutes. Towards the end of the game, when everyone was fatigued, I began to get to the ball first because everyone else simply gave up. It was my moment to shine. Except, having finally got the ball, I'd try to kick it several times without really sending it anywhere. But at least that amused everybody else and it didn't matter to me because at last I was able to join in and have fun.

Every year Charterhouse held a six-kilometre cross-country race round the grounds and every pupil had to compete. I was really excited about it, but half of the students weren't keen at all and thought it far too long.

My friends Lindsey and Rebecca were a bit nervous about the distance and suggested we all run together for moral support. At the beginning of the race they had to slow down to wait for me as I struggled to keep up, but from about halfway it was definitely the other way round. I had not run that far before, but it felt easy. When we reached the dreaded Jacob's ladder (a large number of steps through the wood), I was shocked to find how easily I bounded up them, given that I was always the slowest when we went up them on the way back from town at the weekends.

Best of all, I was allowed to study whatever I wanted and was praised for my academic ability. I chose biology, chemistry, maths and economics and excelled at all of them. I was thrilled to be selected by the school as a candidate for Oxbridge, but because I was having so much fun at Charterhouse those two years went all too quickly and I didn't manage to fill in a UCAS form or make any decisions about my future. Before I knew it, the end of school was nigh and while all my friends had places at universities, I was embarking on an unplanned gap year.

Determined not to waste a year, I decided to join a Raleigh International expedition to Ghana. It was a bit of a battle persuading my parents. Perhaps understandably, they didn't want their daughter going to Africa without them for three months. I explained I would be raising money for charity and building a school. The next hurdle was raising the £2,000 to sign up. I tried everything. I ordered bios with 'I sponsored Raleigh International' etched into them, except half the bios didn't work and I was too embarrassed to sell them. At a cousin's suggestion, I wrote to twenty-five local companies looking for sponsorship, and to my uncle's company in London too. One of the local companies sent me £25 and my uncle sent me £500.

With my own savings I was halfway there. My grandfather had bought some shares for me when I was young and I had kept an eye on the price of them over the years. They seemed to go up and down on a daily basis. It occurred to me that if I bought shares at the right time when the price was low and sold them at a peak, I could make a lot of money. The problem was that I wasn't yet eighteen and couldn't legally trade shares. So I asked my parents. They explained there were brokerage fees involved and I would have to consider this when buying and selling. For a few weeks I checked

the FTSE 100 in the newspaper and then, hedging my bets, bought shares in the National Grid, an oil company (I can't remember which one now) and Santander. I watched their prices avidly and after three months sold them for a profit of £300. Most of that came from Santander.

The rest of the money I made up working at my mum's grocery shop, Cullens, in central London, which she'd run since my parents had sold the corner shop so Dad could open his own restaurant. (My mum had ended up buying Cullens and ran it on her own.) I also made some cash escorting hacks at the local riding school. With only one month to go, I signed up for the trip and got all the relevant travel information, including the vaccinations I needed. I had to ask my parents to pay for the jabs and it dawned on them that I was committed to going, which they still weren't happy about. But before they could change their minds, they were dropping me at Heathrow. It was different in those days: no mobile phones. The only way they could communicate with me was on the group's satellite phone. We were allowed only one phone call each for the three-month trip and that was going to have to be on A-level results day.

I learnt a lot about myself in Ghana. There were twenty-seven of us, split into three groups of nine. We spent a week in Accra all together and then we went off to three different projects. My group was assigned to build a school first. I absolutely loved the physical labour, something I had only seen adult men do before. I would wake up and be first out on the foundations. We had to remove rocks from the ground and dig out trenches. I would grab the wheelbarrow and start digging, but when it was full I couldn't lift it on my own and I'd have to ask someone to help me. I found my muscles swelling and became rather proud of my biceps.

While grafting, I hadn't paid much attention to what the others got up to. We got together for breaks and mealtimes, taking it in turns to cook and wash up. There was some grumbling about one or two in the group who didn't seem to pull their weight, but it didn't particularly bother me. Everything always got done and I was happy doing what was needed. At the end of the project, we all sat in a circle and our group leader said we should think of something to say about each of our fellow team members. It was a bit daunting, waiting to be told what people thought of you. And I was

surprised people thought I was intimidating. I'm really small, quite quiet and generally keep myself to myself. So I couldn't understand why people were scared of me. They also said I had this inner self-motivation to get jobs done and this had inspired them to do the same. I couldn't understand why they weren't all self-motivated too. We were there to build a school and I wanted to build it as quickly as possible. I enjoyed seeing the fruits of our labour and was immensely proud of our teamwork.

Coming home from Ghana, I realised I had caught the travel bug, so I took as many jobs as I could to raise funds. I worked weekdays for a temping agency, answering phones, typing and even working on presentations. The work was varied and I found it exciting to try out different jobs. In the evenings I waitressed at various pubs and restaurants. Sometimes I would finish at 3 a.m. but I would still manage to get up for the day job. On the weekends I worked at a riding school, mucking out stables or leading children out for a hack. Then in the evenings I would head straight to the restaurant for my waitressing job. I must have been working an average of 100 hours a week and didn't get much sleep. My parents were amazing. My mum always made sure there was a meal ready or something I could stick in the microwave. I really have no idea what they thought about my lifestyle choices, but I think they were proud of how hard I was working. In the middle of all this, I managed to fill in the UCAS forms and got a place at St Anne's College, Oxford to study human sciences.

In January 2000 I headed off to Peru for more charitable work abroad. I was sent to a Lunahuaná, a small town by the Cañete river, where I taught English to willing students with another English girl. After our placement was over, we travelled together for a month, riding donkeys out of Colca Canyon, the world's second-deepest gorge, and walking the Inca Trail. We didn't bother with guides, just made our way to the start of the trail and kept going all the way to Machu Picchu. It was an incredible experience; we hadn't trained but were so used to carrying heavy backpacks that it all felt quite normal apart from some mild altitude sickness, but a local gave us some coca leaves to chew on and this helped a lot.

After returning home from South America, I went straight back to my 100-hour week to earn more money for more adventure travelling. That

summer I went to St Petersburg with my friend Charlotte and we took the Trans-Siberian train all the way to Irkutsk and camped round the shores of Lake Baikal. After that we headed south to Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. We hiked and rode horses, camping most nights. When Charlotte went home, another friend came out to join me and we continued exploring, hiking across the country with maps and backpacks, making our way to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan before returning to the UK.

I spent the next three years at Oxford, studying hard but also trying lots of sports. I joined the Oxford University Women's Lightweight Rowing Club squad and after an intense eight-week training camp was as fit and lean as I have ever been. We had eleven training sessions a week and one of them was an hour of running. This was the first time I'd run properly. By the end of the camp I was the second-fastest runner on the squad. I enjoyed rowing and the hard training programme, but I didn't enjoy the politics. It was made clear that I wouldn't get a place for the boat race, despite being the most reliable and attentive member of the team. My power-to-weight ratio was good and I knew I could improve my technique, but it soon became clear from the other girls that I didn't belong there.

Luckily for me, I had somewhere else to go: Oxford's modern pentathlon team. I hadn't even heard of the pentathlon until a friend asked me to join the St Anne's team so we could compete. At the time I could ride a horse and run three kilometres, but I wasn't a good swimmer, had only shot a rifle and not a pistol, and had definitely never held a sword before. I threw myself at the sport with all my passion, motivation and rigour, learning to swim with a more efficient stroke and working on my speed. I learnt how to fence épée and became a pretty reliable pistol shooter. Unlike rowing, I enjoyed the social side of pentathlon as well. And I was proud to earn my status as a half-blue in representing Oxford.

Throughout my childhood, I had always been good with numbers and every career questionnaire had me as an accountant or banker. So, despite studying science, it was no surprise the banks found me. A small group of us would regularly be wined and dined by various banks – Goldman Sachs, Deutsche, UBS – on the 'milk round' to recruit bright graduates. In the summer of my second year, I had an internship in the mergers and