

Marc Herremans
THE CARDS YOU
ARE HOLDING

*13 ways to turn adversity
into opportunity*

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FOREWORD

Many books start with a foreword in which the author is placed on a pedestal by the many praises sung by someone else. However, in my book, I would like to write it myself because I am an ordinary guy who is anything but perfect and therefore does not need to be placed on a pedestal. Just like everyone else, I have made mistakes and will likely make more. Just like everyone else, I have been through bad times and maybe will go through bad times again; just like everyone else, I have failed and will likely fail again. That is what this book is about: about how our life is like a game of cards with inevitable ups and downs. Since my accident, I have given lectures throughout Belgium and far beyond its borders. One of the first things I always ask is: “Could you stand up and sit down again?” Then I say: “Voilà. You have just done something



Ace of Hearts: Born lucky



Nobody chooses where he or she is born. I was dealt a winning hand right from the start: the ace of hearts. Born lucky. Because that's how it is, right? Born healthy in Belgium, in a warm house with plenty of food and love, surrounded by a loving family. Not everyone gets the full package: maybe you are born in a land with limited possibilities, or with a handicap, maybe you lost one of your parents, or maybe they divorced when you were still young. But there are always things to be thankful for. I have many things to be thankful for. My father has always done everything he could for his children. He was a police officer in Antwerp and a volunteer fireman in our town. Maybe he saw too much misery, saw too much of society's underbelly. It made him somewhat pessimistic. Like me, my father had a strong sense of justice, but he could not find room for it in his life. But he was

it. He also started competing in triathlons and has even completed three (including the Iron Man of Lanzarote). He has a family and three kids, and is always there for me and the family.

There are no heroic stories to tell about my family, but to me they are invaluable. Maybe this is the best way I can describe us: We don't bother each other too much and we each have our own, busy lives. But we live close to each other, and are there for each other when necessary. We would do anything for each other. Maybe I used to think it was normal, that warm home I grew up in, but after all those years I have started appreciating just how lucky we were. It was hectic in our house with three kids and the day-care kids. Yet it was always peaceful. We weren't the most talkative bunch, we weren't big on hugs. When I think about the past, I see our Sundays. In the morning, I played a game of soccer and then we ate together. On Sundays we always had fries. I can still see us sitting at the table with my grandfather, radio set to *De Tijd van Toen*. Quiet, peaceful. Everyone engaged with their own thoughts, but still together. And what kind of kid was I?

If I look back at my youth, I already see a bit of *persistence*, always "wanting to do my own thing my way".

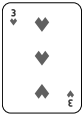
My very first memory is from when I was roughly five years old. I can see it now: I am in the last class of kindergarten and have a jigsaw puzzle in front of me that I just can't do. I ask the teacher whether if I can go to the bathroom and then slip out of school. Close to the school building there is an army terrain and an army truck just happens to drive by.

If the 'army men' see me, I'll be in trouble. Nobody can see me, I've escaped! With the grace of a startled cat, I jump into the bushes. As soon as the truck is out of sight, I crawl from my hiding place and walk home. For the small boy I was at the time, that's pretty far. As soon as I see our house, I realize I can't go in. My mom would wonder what I'm doing there. Next to our house is a house still under construction, and I hide there. In the meantime, the school has called my mom of course: "We have a problem, Marc is gone." My parents are in a panic. What happened to their son? Everyone starts searching, until they hear sounds coming from the construction site. Finally, they find me. There is little Marc, building a sand castle... We laughed about it, later. Apparently, I had also gotten my foot lodged between the chain of my bicycle and lost my big toe thanks to it, but I can't remember that at all. When I look at my toes, I see clearly that that really happened to me. In short: I turned my parents' hair gray as a kid. A sign of what was to come...



3 OF HEARTS:

Sports and growing up: believe in yourself



Sports, I have always loved them. As a young boy, I played soccer – when I wasn’t in the woods climbing trees. And there was the motocross infatuation. And then it was boxing. I saw *Rocky* and immediately felt a kinship. The underdog, that’s how I felt at school too. The guy nobody believed in. You hear similar stories from many athletes, about how they start at the bottom and work their way up, all alone, usually with only perseverance spurring them on. If there’s anything I learned in the classrooms, it’s that I had to fight for my dreams. “I’ll get there, doing it my way.” I don’t remember how often I thought that as a young boy. I was always convinced that I would get there. I just did not know exactly how. *Rocky* seemed to make all the jigsaw pieces fall into place.

My parents were not very pleased with my new passion. They thought boxing was too aggressive, and I was good at

dreams on our children. They don't have to go to college to become what we had imagined they would be or what we would have liked to be. They have to follow their own dreams. The more their parents, godparents, aunts, uncles and friends support them, the greater the odds are that those kids will lead a successful life. Everyone in their own way, in their own field. And even if you don't have parents that support your choice: dare to believe in yourself. Because that is where every dream starts and ends...

EXERCISE :

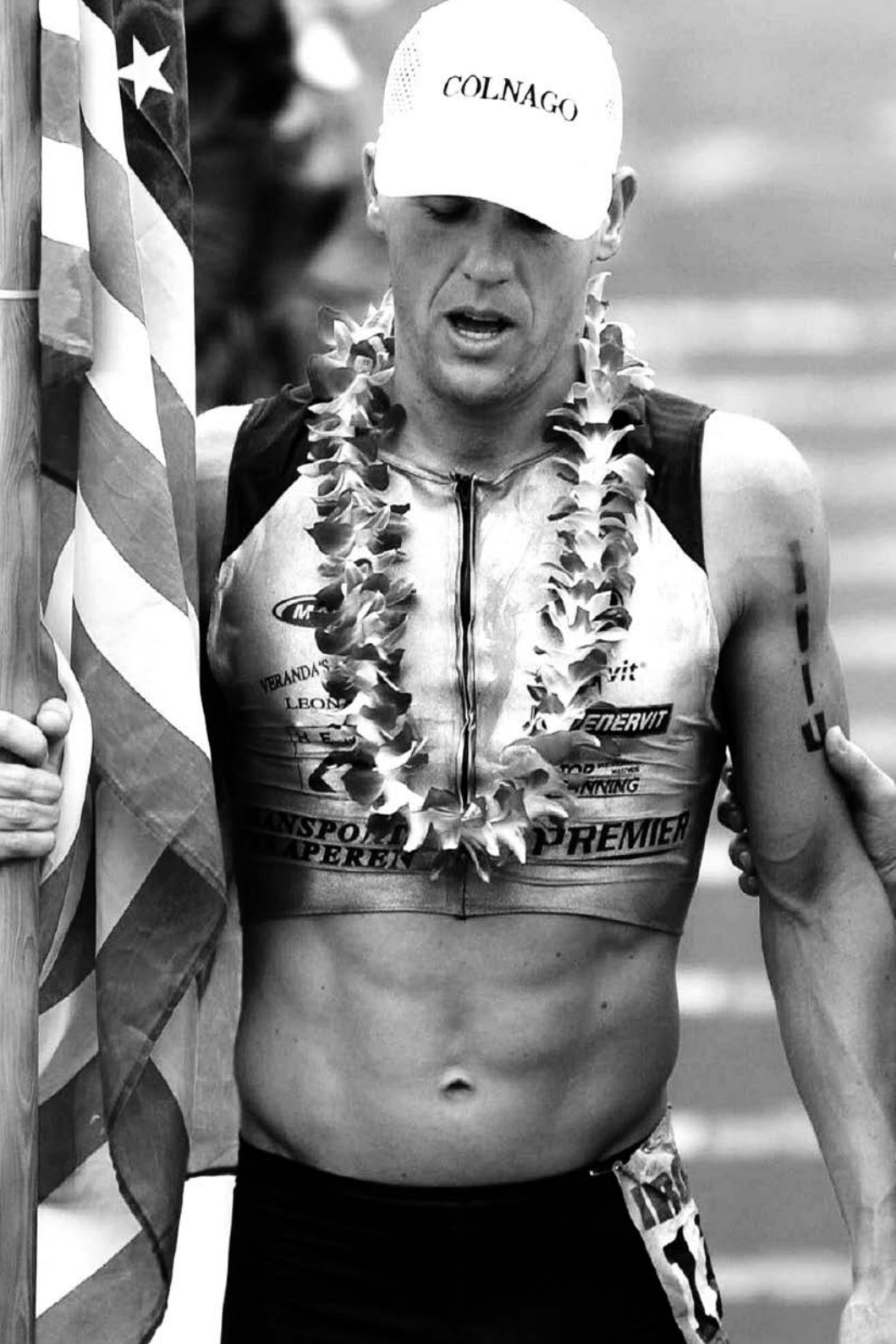
Sometimes you lose sight of your dreams, while most people are best at the things they prefer to do.... So: what made you happy when you were a young girl or boy? What did you really like to do? It can be sports, but can also be drawing, writing, singing, making music... Write down what made you happy. And why don't you do it anymore? And finally: what would be necessary for you to start again on one of those old passions?

This is what I liked to do as a kid:

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I don't do it anymore because:

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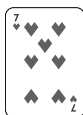
WINNING

TRANSPORT
PAPEREN

PREMIER

7 OF HEARTS:

Top sport/every opportunity
is a gift: take them and go
for it. Turn your enemy into
your friend



When I had the opportunity to really go for my sport, I learned how important perseverance is. I also learned to be grateful for the ‘enemies’ in your life. My elementary school teacher with the quick hands? I had to be grateful for him, because he taught me to surpass myself. Because he dealt blows and wasn’t fair, I developed the will to get there, and in my own way. Every time it got tough, every time I wanted to give up, I thought of him: I wanted to prove him wrong. That way my past enemy became my friend. It can work that way with all your ‘enemies’ if you teach yourself to think that way. Businesses with a large competitor will outdo themselves to become better than the ‘enemy’.

And there are many such examples. For me it was that teacher, and later my competitors. I always wanted to beat them, and that made me better and better. But that counts



JACK OF HEARTS:

My bucket list



Six months after my accident, I was training intensively again. The words spoken by my nephew Jules still echoed clearly in my head: I was still here. I traded in my raw deal and got a jack of hearts. My bucket list. I repeated it every training, like a mantra: Hawaii, the Crocodile Trophy, becoming a father. I would not let myself be beaten. My body may be paralyzed, but my dreams were not. My back may be broken, but my will was stronger than ever.

Eight months after the accident I stood at the start of the Iron Man of Hawaii. It was an immediate eye-opener. I saw my fellow triathletes and realized that I was not very well prepared. I arrived with a tractor instead of a hand-bike, so to speak. I didn't know that the equipment was as crucial as it is. I had trained at home with a Dutchman who

Think of what you gained when you gave up that piece of your life. What other hobby, special friendship, new career path... What came from your change?

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KING OF HEARTS:

The ultimate dream: to walk again



My favorite thing to do was running. Ironically, if you choose to look at it that way, because as long as there are no major medical breakthroughs,

I will have to sit for rest of my life, however much I used to hate it. And being paralyzed from the chest down means more than not being able to walk anymore. Not only do your legs not work, your stomach and lower back muscles wither away too. Your entire body is thrown off, you have to relearn everything. In the beginning, it was, for instance, incredibly difficult to get in and out of my wheelchair. My legs seemed to weigh a ton. Suddenly I was ill all the time. That's normal after becoming paralyzed, but it was new to me. My body had always followed my mind anywhere and now it limited me in certain aspects. That requires getting used to, and not just for the paraplegic. Your entire environment needs to adapt. That is not evident to partners, parents, children, family and friends.

EXERCISE :

It is and will always be the essence: you can create happiness. Is it always easy? Definitely not. But ask yourself: what do you gain from being negative and focusing on the things that go wrong? Nothing at all. What do you gain from being positive and focusing on the good things that happen? You become even happier. You're given hope, courage, a warm feeling. You have nothing to lose, you only stand to gain something. So give it a shot: write down for yourself what was good about that day, every day for a month. Maybe it's hard in the beginning and you can only write down: "The coffee was nice today." Okay, write it down. And the second day you might already have two things to write down. It's an exercise that you have to keep at for a while, but it will help you to remember the good things – that really happen to everyone – and to focus on them. You will notice the difference in your mood yourself when you think: "The bus driver gave me a friendly smile today" instead of: "I had to wait ten minutes for the bus again."