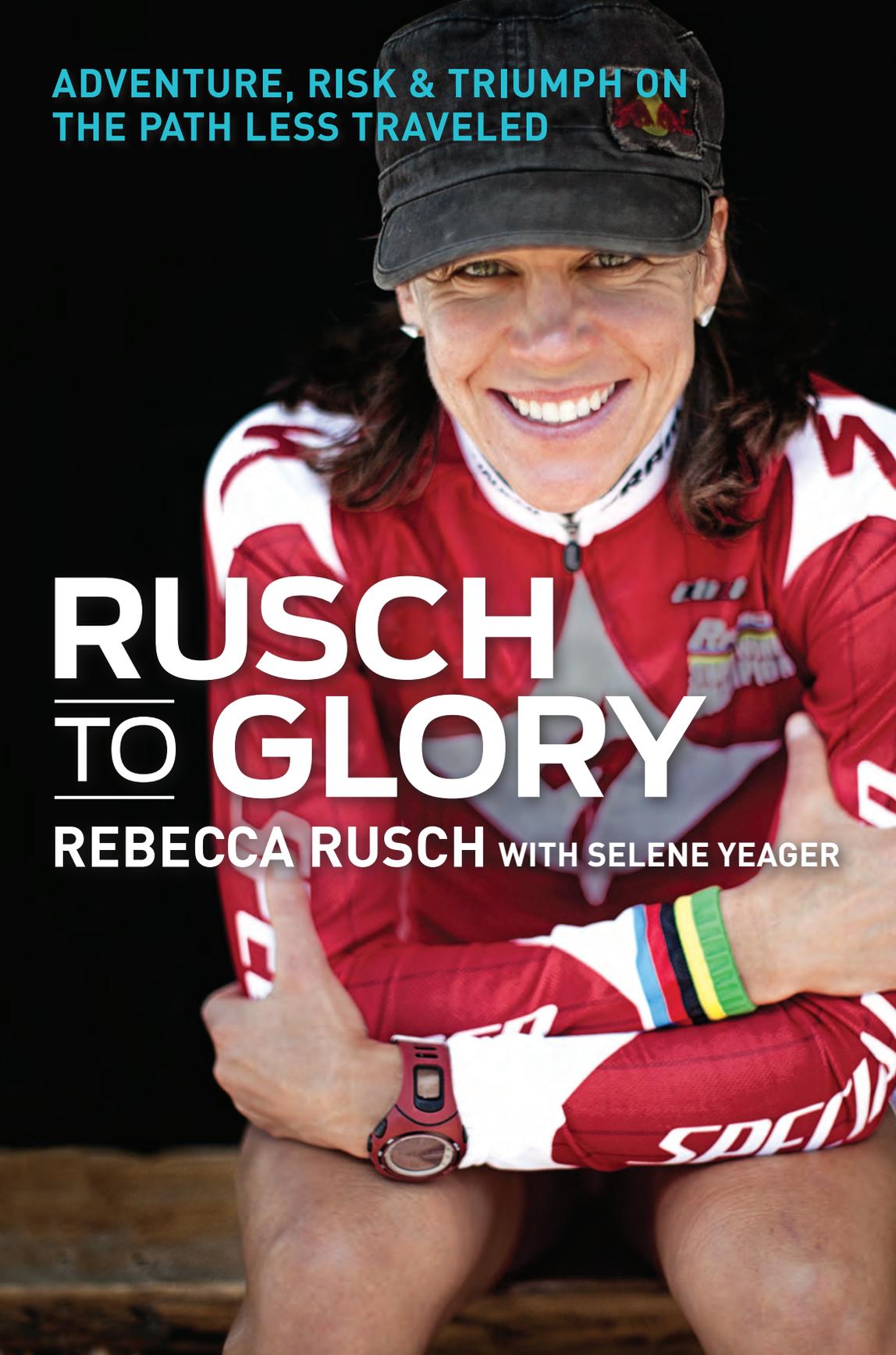


ADVENTURE, RISK & TRIUMPH ON
THE PATH LESS TRAVELED

RUSCH TO GLORY

REBECCA RUSCH WITH SELENE YEAGER



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For everyone who's ever thought, *That looks amazing, but I could never . . .* these stories are for you. I believe you can. I'm living proof of that. And I hope you enjoy the trying as much as I have.

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FOREWORD

My most memorable impression of Rebecca Rusch came in Morocco, during the 1998 Eco-Challenge. In the competition, we asked that four-person teams race through the rugged Atlas Mountains, carrying all their own food and water, and often sleeping just an hour a night. As you can imagine, competitors were forced to push their mental, physical, and emotional limits in order to succeed. Many racers later told me that they found the Eco-Challenge to be a true judge of their character, simply because in the face of such severe hardship they found out what they were truly made of. Several of my later television programs, such as *Survivor* and even *The Apprentice*, put competitors in similar situations, but nowhere did this play out more radically than in Eco-Challenge.

Night was falling at Checkpoint 11 during that 1998 Eco. It was the last stop before a long and dangerous rappel into a gorge near the town of Tinghir. But there was a problem: One team was lost and had not been seen or heard from for more than 12 hours. Team Rubicon had somehow misread its maps and could have been anywhere within the steep crags and canyons. I was personally leading the search party by helicopter. As the hours passed and darkness would soon require that we suspend the search, I became more and more frustrated. But just when all seemed lost, the men and women of Team Rubicon limped into the checkpoint, safe and sound.

With most teams, that would have been the end of it. After marching off course for more than 12 hours, they would either quit the race or sleep until morning before attempting something so daring as a thousand-foot rappel down a sheer cliff face in the dark. Once it became clear that Rubicon had no intention of quitting, I demanded that they halt for the night. Clearly, there were severe safety issues at stake. Each and every member of the team was exhausted. You could see it in their body language and in their eyes—pure, utter, bone-deep fatigue.

I expected that Team Rubicon would welcome my decision. In fact, each member of the team was obviously relieved that I demanded they sleep before pushing on.

Every member except one.

Rebecca Rusch took charge, insisting that she and her teammates be allowed to choose their own competitive path. By resting for the night, she argued, they would fall even farther behind the competition.

I argued back. As the television cameras caught the moment so vividly, I told her that she was being foolish and perhaps risking her life. And at what cost? It was clear that Team Rubicon would not win the race. Why press on when the most sane thing to do would be to sleep and wake up to start fresh?

But that's what makes Rebecca Rusch such a special individual. Many of us pay lip service to the concept of pushing our mental, physical, and emotional limits, but that notion is more than just a mere concept to Rebecca. In a world that all too often settles for mediocrity and conformity, Rebecca knows that the secret to success is being your best in all you do. And once you establish that baseline, you push through it.

Again, and again, and again. Never settling. Never resting on her laurels. Never once striving to be anything but her best.

Within these pages you will learn how Rebecca does this, and how you can do it too. You will read these words and be inspired. What you do next is up to you. Perhaps it is enough right now that you hold

this very special book in your hands, knowing that a great adventure is about to unfold—one that will at the very least make for a very entertaining read, and at the very most may change your life for the better.

I relented that night in Morocco. Team Rubicon was allowed to bash on into the fading light. But I sent a team of mountain guides to follow behind, just to ensure that they were in capable hands.

They were, thanks to Rebecca. And now, so are you.

Mark Burnett

Los Angeles, California

July 2014

INTRODUCTION

The Wild Ride

Over the course of my career as a professional athlete, I've repeatedly had to reinvent myself in the face of fear and uncertainty. Never was that more true than in the fall of 2005. I was enjoying the golden years of a successful career in adventure racing, and though I was methodically completing my firefighter and EMT training during my downtime in my adopted hometown of Ketchum, Idaho, I wasn't quite ready to walk away from being a professional athlete. But when Montrail, my most prominent sponsor, called to say the company had been sold and their sponsorships would be shut down, it looked like I wasn't going to have the luxury of choosing my own exit.

Just like that, a 10-year span of world travel, team management, and expedition competition was over. When the dust settled, I had just one sponsor remaining. Instead of cutting me loose, the team at Red Bull said, "Find something amazing to do." It was in this big bang of opportunity that my professional mountain biking career took shape.

The average American changes jobs around 11 times in the course of his or her professional life. I certainly fit that statistic. I've worked as a marketing associate, aerobics instructor, limo driver, barista, outdoor guide, climbing-gym manager, motivational speaker, construction worker, firefighter, and professional athlete. These days most people know me as a professional cyclist and assume my world championships and Leadville wins were years in the making. But the truth is, I didn't become a professional mountain biker until I was 38 years old, and I didn't win the Leadville Trail 100 MTB—the most prestigious mountain bike race in the United States, if not the world—for the first time until I was 40.

Ironically, I will likely be most remembered for a sport I initially loathed. Long before members of the media christened me “the world's greatest female endurance cyclist,” I hated racing a mountain bike. It was the bitter pill I had to swallow in order to participate in the sport I *did* enjoy: adventure racing. Even after racing on two wheels became my paycheck, I still didn't love it and honestly was not very good at it. Being on a mountain bike made me feel clumsy and outmatched. I crashed, chickened out, cried, and ran an awful lot in my first races, and even now, though I certainly have the fitness and endurance to compete and win, I still struggle with the technical aspects of the sport. It wasn't too long ago that I was so physically and mentally broken trying to navigate a river of rocks in a race in Pennsylvania that I picked up my bike and hurled it as far as I could while I shouted expletives into the woods. This was the very same bike I would pilot to a record-smashing victory at Leadville just three months later.

Time heals all wounds, and a bruised ego eventually recovers too. Along with skill and experience came a new appreciation for mountain biking and eventually a deep, lasting love. What was once my nemesis became my primary outlet for adventure and joy. The bike relaunched

my career and ultimately turned into my ticket to a steady paycheck—or at least as steady as they come for a professional athlete.

I'd like to think that the millions of miles I've covered by foot, boat, bike, and even by camel have earned me an honorary PhD in how to get through life. When I found myself clinging to El Capitan, more than 3,000 feet off the deck with nowhere to go but up, I learned a little something about finishing what I started. Nursing a sick teammate back to health from heatstroke and dehydration in Vietnam as one of the biggest races on earth slid from my grasp changed how I think about patience and failure. After river-boarding the Grand Canyon unsupported in winter, standing on the other side of what seemed an impossible challenge, I knew for certain that limits are much farther in the distance than we imagine.

All of these adventures, journeys, challenges, and explorations have allowed me to see the beauty and wonder of places I never knew existed. I've been touched and enriched by the people who inhabit these corners of the world. Through it all, I've come to a deeper understanding of who I am, what motivates me, and what I'm passionate about. I've been able to step outside of my comfort zone to do some scary stuff. I've failed and succeeded, but nearly every time, I've arrived at the finish line a better person. My formula is simple: Say yes to opportunities, ask a lot of questions, and then dive in.

I never in a million years imagined I'd become a professional athlete. I thought athletes were born just how I saw them on TV: fit and ambitious, somehow divinely destined to be standing there, hoisting broken finish line tape and trophies over their heads. After all, they'd been dealt a fistful of athletic aces in the game of life and they were simply playing their hand. Having lived it, I can tell you that professional athletes are just regular people who've followed a passion with intense determination. As in any career, a professional athlete must do the hard work, endure setbacks, and make sacrifices. So while you

might look at my life now and think I'm just another pro who was groomed for glory, once you know the whole story, you'll realize that we have more in common than you might think.

Finding Myself at the Finish Line

It all started with a tracksuit.

Being the typical younger sibling, all I wanted to do was hang out with my sister, Sharon, and her high school friends. Carol was my sister's best friend and our next-door neighbor. She was tall, thin, and energetic, and she had an awesome tracksuit with block lettering boldly proclaiming "Downers Grove North" across the chest. With a drawstring at the waist and elastic at the ankles, the thick cotton pants ballooned into a silhouette only MC Hammer or a paratrooper could love. It was the early 1980s, I was 14, and I had to have a tracksuit like Carol's. "Join the cross-country team," she told me. "They give you one for free, and if you're a runner, you'll never get fat." It was music to my ears. My own family tree was more oak than willow. Even though I tipped the scales at around 95 pounds, I figured if I didn't do something, I was destined to get fat, so I promptly enlisted in organized sports.

I was a tomboy at heart, but I had never thought about joining a team until Carol told me about cross-country. Growing up, I had

Barbies and other dolls, but I loved to play outside with the boys and come home dirty and scraped up. I lived for the camping and skiing trips Mom took us on a couple of times every year. Back at home, I'd find my own adventures camping in the backyard with my sister or racing around the block playing tag with the other neighborhood kids. I got a charge out of getting sweaty and out of breath, feeling my heart pounding after riding my Huffy up the hill on our street. But as a girl about to enter high school, the games and adventures I found exhilarating as a kid were replaced with social pressures of what to wear, how to fit in, and how you looked. So it wasn't the allure of camaraderie or crossing a glorious finish line that prompted me to enlist in organized sports upon entering high school—it was a cotton tracksuit and a blossoming weight complex.

WE LIVED ON A QUIANT brick street in the suburbs of Chicago. Normal as that might sound, I didn't exactly grow up in a traditional family. My father, a U.S. Air Force captain, was shot down in Laos in 1973. My parents were divorced by that point, and I was too young to fully comprehend his death or the factors that contributed to it. People often asked me about my dad, and I'd respond mechanically, "He was shot down in the Vietnam War," and that would quickly end the conversation. It never occurred to me that I was missing out on having a dad—I had no reference to make me feel sad about it.

My mom, Judy, made the arduous daily commute into Chicago. After graduating *summa cum laude* with a math degree, she landed a job in the computer industry, where she worked her way from programmer to the upper ranks of management. As a woman in a predominantly male profession in the 1970s and one of the only women at the top, she was a pioneer. She had to be tough and work more diligently than most of her male coworkers to prove her worth.

Mom didn't have to talk to us about hard work and dedication; she lived it. Whether it was riding the train 45 minutes each way to watch a track meet or staying up until 2 a.m. to bake cookies for my class, she continually stretched herself to meet traditional expectations while also being the breadwinner and disciplinarian. She was supportive, but she was also tough, never the doting mother. She was independent and efficient because she had to be, and my sister and I learned to be that way too.

With my mom working long, unpredictable hours, Sharon and I were left to our own devices in the afternoons and evenings. I was notorious for losing the house key, so Sharon would elect me to break in through the basement window. I'd shimmy through the tiny opening, hang from the sash by my fingers, drop a few feet onto the cement floor, and then claw through the cobwebs in the dark and dash up the stairs to turn on the lights. It was always tempting to wait a while before unlocking the front door for Sharon. Once we were in, we'd raid the fridge, concocting some pretty crazy after-school snacks. For those times when we weren't opting for a "sensible" dinner—frozen entrées or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches—we would simply eat ice cream or cheese and crackers for dinner.

Despite being a good student and having a loving, if irregular home life, I started to feel overwhelmed with anxiety about pretty much everything—my family, my mom's job, school, my body, what to wear, making friends—and I felt very alone. I didn't think it was something my mom or sister or any of my friends dealt with, so I bottled up the stress until it reached the point where I had to find an outlet: I'd stuff down a jar of peanut butter or whatever was in the house. The momentary satisfaction of eating was soon displaced by the guilt and disgust I felt toward myself, so I'd go to the bathroom and purge myself of whatever I'd eaten.

The vicious cycle continued on and off throughout much of high school and college until one night my mom heard me vomiting in the

bathroom and confronted me. We were both really upset, and the words didn't come easily. I was embarrassed and ashamed. Mom was shocked, confused, and felt like she had failed as a parent. Once we calmed down a little, Mom said, "We have to sort this out, but it's bigger than me." She arranged some one-on-one and family counseling at our church. In one of the sessions, Mom admitted to worrying about a raise that hadn't gone through at work and the resulting financial strain of raising a family as a single parent. This was heavy stuff for me and my sister. Mom had worked so hard to take care of everything and shield us from the stress in her life. So much so that when I ran up against my own problems and insecurities, I felt confused and alone, with no one to turn to. When I was finally able to open up about the important issues in my life, it felt like throwing off a heavy blanket that had been suffocating me for years. Other people were sad, depressed, scared, and lost too. It was a revelation to find out that I was not alone in those emotions.

It was in the midst of all of this drama that running had entered my life. Looking back, I can say that running was essential in helping me break the cycle of bulimia. Sports became a healthy outlet for my stress and worries, and the team proved to be a supportive peer group. I knew that I needed to treat my body better. And it turned out I was pretty good at running. I was scrappy, didn't mind the hard work, and was extremely competitive with myself. The cross-country team led me to the track team, where I ran the 200, the 800, and the 1600, as well as 200 hurdles and the long jump. I excelled in the longer-distance events, but I dabbled in everything. The track team was a much bigger group of girls, so that meant fuller buses, bigger events, and an even larger group of friends. The variety was a blast, but it was cross-country running that really grabbed my soul. I liked the feel of the grass and leaves under my running cleats, and the fact that each course was different. I liked not knowing what was around the next turn. I was

easily bored with the repetition of running in circles. I craved variety and a taste of adventure.

Sure, I liked the physical transformation as I flourished in running, but the psychological benefits were even better. I liked the discipline athletics was teaching me and the person it was helping me become. It was thrilling to discover how hard I could push myself. My bedroom was becoming littered with medals, trophies, and plaques—proof that I was good at something and publicly recognized for it.

I was also beginning to feel like a leader and developing lifelong bonds of friendship with my team. Though we ran individually, we were scored together. We cultivated a competitive energy that pushed us all to be better, and in the process we formed the unbreakable bond that accompanies a common goal and shared work.

Coach Ritter was a real father figure in my life—strict, yet gentle and reassuring. He didn't say much and didn't need to. He offered support and direction but also expected us to do the work and gave us the freedom to make a few mistakes on our own. Since I wasn't as experienced as a lot of the other runners, I'd often get frustrated with myself because my skill didn't match my desire. So he would spend extra time helping me with my technique and strategy, strengthening my work ethic along the way. He continually reminded me to not take myself too seriously, and he taught me how to win and lose with grace. It was the first glimpse of what I'd missed by not having a dad around.

Running was also where I learned about the bitter, lingering after-taste of quitting. My senior year, I'd been sick during the week leading up to the regional cross-country meet, a qualifying event for the Illinois state championship. When the race was well under way, I found myself unable to keep up with the top girls and struggling mentally. There was nothing obviously wrong, but it was clear that I was not having a good race. Finally, I just stepped off the course, relieved to stop the pain. When the race ended and my teammates, mom, and coach all

rushed over to see if I was okay, I had no answer for them—I'd simply given up, and in the process let everyone down. Without my points, the team's chances of qualifying for the state meet were in jeopardy. I was a quitter. Fortunately, other girls on my team had the races of their lives.

Going into the state meet two weeks later, I needed to get my head out of the way and run as I'd always run, but I didn't know how to go about it. The assistant coach sat me down and gave me a mantra to chant: *I can, I will, I won't be denied*. When the gun went off, I ran for the team and for myself, and I ran my heart out. I shook off my insecurities to earn individual all-state status, and we won the state title. I vowed to never quit a race again.

Three decades later, I still bear the scar from that day in Glenview, Illinois, when I stepped off the course. Should the notion of quitting ever enter my mind again, I would ask myself this: *Would you rather suffer now and finish this race, or quit—only to suffer through the process of explaining yourself to friends and family?* I've competed in a lot of races over the years, and the answer is almost always the same: The pain of quitting far outlasts the pain of pushing forward. I'd rather roll in dead last as volunteers are packing up the finish line (which happened to me in my first cross-country ski race) and have people think, *Look at that lady hanging in there. Good for her!* By lining up for a race, I'm making a commitment—to myself, my friends, my family, my teammates, my fans—to finish, no matter what place I'm in. I rise to the occasion when I remind myself that someone else is watching.

REBECCA RUSCH

has run the gauntlet of endurance sports over her career as a professional athlete—climbing, adventure racing, whitewater rafting, cross-country skiing, and mountain biking—racking up accolades and world championships along the way. But while she might seem like just another pro playing out a fistful of aces, her empowering story proves that anyone can rise above self-doubt and find their true potential.

First turning heads with her climbing and paddling skills, Rusch soon found herself spearheading adventure racing teams. As she fought her way through the jungles of Borneo, raced camels across Morocco, threaded the rugged Tian Shan mountains, and river-boarded the Grand Canyon in the dead of winter, she was forced to stare down her own demons. Through it all, Rusch continually redefined her limits, pushing deep into the pain cave and emerging ready for the next great challenge.

At age 38, Rusch faced a tough decision: retire or reinvent herself yet again. Overpowering a lack of skill with her relentless drive, she shifted her focus to endurance mountain bike racing and rode straight into the record books at a moment when most athletes walk away.

Rusch to Glory is more than an epic story of adventure; it is a testament to the rewards of hard work, determination, and resilience on the long road to personal and professional triumph.



“In a world that all too often settles for mediocrity and conformity, Rebecca knows that the secret to success is being your best in all you do. And once you establish that baseline, you push through it.”

—MARK BURNETT,
producer of *Eco-Challenge* and *Survivor*

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