‘Matt is living proof that limits are rarely real; they’re just stories waiting to be rewritten.’
—**Layne Beachley** AO, 7x World Surfing Champion

WHY NOT?

BREAKING LIMITS IN SPORT, BUSINESS AND LIFE

MATT FORMSTON

Multi-Sport World Champion. Business Executive. Blind.

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WILEY

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For Mum and Dad, who set the standard high enough to matter, and understood long before I did that high standards aren't a burden: they're the greatest gift you can give someone you love.

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To my children: you only know the version of me that made it through. One day, when you’re old enough to read this book, you’ll meet a version of your father that might be hard to recognise. I’m not proud of everything in these pages, but I am proud of what came after. The standards I ask of you are the same ones I now hold myself to every single day. If you grow up to be good humans with the courage to live by your values, then I’ll know I got the most important job right.

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And to everyone who has sat in the audience and shared their story: this book is for you.

Introduction

Rock Hard, Marshmallow Soft

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Blindness was never my biggest fight.

At five years old, a professor of ophthalmology told my parents their son would go blind. My macular dystrophy was progressive and incurable. I would never play sport, never get a decent job, never have many friends. They should lower their expectations — prepare me for a life of dependency. The world, according to medical science, had already written my future.

Four decades later, I've won four world championships in surfing, become a world champion cyclist and world record holder, surfed a 51-foot wave at Nazaré that earned a Guinness World Record, built an executive career across sales, operations and leadership, raised three children, and been awarded the AM: the Member of the Order of Australia.

But none of that was the hard part.

The real battle was internal, not physical. I spent years chasing an identity I didn't understand — a life of partying and violence that nearly ended with me dead or in jail. When sport disappeared from my life after glandular fever took me out of competition, I didn't just lose an outlet — I lost the only place where my identity had been real. Without the footy field, without the ice hockey rink, without an arena where I was measured on contribution rather than perception, I didn't know who I was anymore.

So, I built something else. Not a life — an image.

My new sport became other people's validation. I trained every day, but not to perform: I trained to look good. Heavy weights, speed bag, boxing drills. I wanted an eight pack. I wanted ripped shoulders. I wanted a body that would attract the chicks. I wanted to look like someone you wouldn't mess with.

And it worked. I could pull chicks. I could drink harder than most. I could hold my own in fights. But the pride wasn't coming from inside me. It never was. It was borrowed pride — pride that only existed if someone else said it out loud.

One Christmas Eve, I woke up covered in blood that wasn't mine, with no memory of what I'd done. The next morning I sat at the family table playing the loving son, hoping the police wouldn't knock on the door.

That was rock bottom. Not the wave, not the blindness — the person I'd become when I wasn't holding myself accountable.

Losing yourself is harder than losing your sight. That's the truth this book is built on.

The turning point

The moment everything changed came in a dark apartment in Killara. I was 30 years old, living in my sister Jacqui's spare room after another failed relationship, surrounded by nothing but silence and the sound of other people's lives drifting through the walls.

There was a man living in the building. About 60. Unemployed and living with his mother. Every time I passed him, he'd tell me about the awesome job he used to have. Past tense. His mother made excuses for him constantly. It was the world's fault he was unemployed; it was the world's fault he'd never built a life of his own.

One afternoon, I came inside and thought: *What a loser.*

Then the worse thought hit: *That could be me.*

He had fewer excuses than I did. I was blind. I had a disability. I had discrimination and inaccessible systems. I had excuses that would hold up in any court of public opinion. But they were still excuses. And if this man, with the world at his feet, could waste his life making excuses, then I had even more reason to stop making mine.

That realisation scared me into having what my dad would call 'a good hard look at yourself'. And what I found wasn't pretty. I'd spent years letting my blindness become a ceiling instead of a starting point. Letting other people's low expectations become my excuse to aim low. Letting the difficulties of my disability justify my mediocrity.

It had to stop. I had to take complete responsibility for my standards and my own future. No more blaming my circumstances; no more waiting to be saved; no more accepting excuses — my own or anyone else's.

People ask me all the time what my greatest achievement is. They assume it's being honoured as a Member of the Order of Australia, or the Netflix documentary, or one of my world records or world titles.

But it's none of these.

My greatest achievement is bringing my life back from nearly death or jail. Building a foundation for a successful relationship with my wife. Creating a life that gives my children something solid to stand on. That internal work — the brutal honesty, the raised standards, the refusal to accept excuses — created the platform for everything that followed.

In 2008, I made the decision. In 2010, everything showed up. I met my wife Bex. I was selected to cycle for Australia. I became an executive and was appointed to my first board. I bought my second property. It might sound like a lucky year, but there's nothing lucky about it. I'd done the work. I was finally set up right. The external results followed the internal transformation.

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And here's the part no one expects: my life is easier now than it was before. I work harder than ever — training, business, family, all of it — but it feels lighter. Since I committed to these standards, I've won gold medals, broken world records, and won business awards and community awards almost every year. The contrast is stark. Life feels easier now because I'm set up right. I wasn't before.

The proof

Nazaré, in Portugal, is the colosseum of big wave surfing. Fifty-foot walls of water moving with the weight of freight trains: taller than five-storey buildings, wider than a football field. The Portuguese coast gets hammered by Atlantic storms that travel thousands of kilometres across open ocean, gathering power, before funnelling into the underwater Nazaré Canyon, a geological formation that acts like a wave amplifier, turning ordinary swells into moving mountains.

For most surfers in the world, just being there is unthinkable. For most people in the world, the sight of those waves is unbelievable. And for a blind person to step one foot into this water is inconceivable.

Make no mistake: Nazaré is a war zone in the ocean. Every person in the water knows that if we don't do our jobs right — if I miss a cue, if my tow driver misjudges a wave, if my safety team is a second too slow — someone goes home to their family in a body bag. The stakes couldn't be higher. This isn't extreme sports theatre: it's life and death with an audience.

In front of me, Lucas 'Chumbo' Chianca sat on his jet ski, throttle steady, the rope stretched tight between us. He was my eyes out there. Because I'm blind, I don't have access to the visual data stream other surfers rely on — the ability to read wave faces, judge timing, spot escape routes. Lucas interpreted all of that for me and translated it into sound with three blasts of his whistle. The first told me to release

the tow rope. The second told me when to bottom turn. The third signalled it's time to kick out. Trust is reduced to sound. My job was to listen and commit.

On the first blow of the whistle, I let go of the rope and dropped straight down the wave face. I could feel the immense size of the wave under my feet.

I couldn't see the wave that would become my Guinness World Record. I couldn't see the face steepening or the lip beginning to throw. What I could feel was the board hammering across the surface at 60 kilometres per hour, then launching into freefall down what resembled a five-storey building. This isn't sliding into a wave; it's dropping through space, the board skipping and chattering as it tries to maintain contact with a wall of water that's nearly vertical.

On the second whistle, I made the bottom turn, cutting into the wave face. My brain filtered the world into ruthless focus. All the noise vanished — the jet ski engines, the roar of whitewater, the radio chatter between safety teams. What remained was only the data I needed: the hum of the rail cutting through water; the rush of ocean beneath me; the pressure of the air across my face; the subtle shift in board vibration that told me whether I was holding my line or about to lose it.

I was having so much fun up there that I stayed too long. By the time I heard the third whistle, I knew it was too late. I jumped off my board, trying to get under the power of the wave, but then the wave detonated. Hundreds of Olympic swimming pools' worth of water came crashing down in a single violent moment. The pressure tries to rip your limbs off. Your shoulders might dislocate; your joints might tear. So, I pulled my arms tight into my chest and crossed my legs to give the ocean less to grab. I'd trained my breath hold to nearly six minutes for this exact scenario. The capability was built. The question was whether I'd need to use it.

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Towards the end of my second hold down, something strange happened. I started smiling underwater. Giggling, even. Because I'd surfed 24 waves over three days at Nazaré without a single proper wipeout. I'd built all this capability — the breath hold, the strength, the training — and hadn't actually needed to use it yet. On this, my 25th wave, while getting ragdolled in the impact zone, I finally got to test what I'd prepared for.

That probably seems insane: smiling while being held underwater by an immense wave. But that's what happens when the work is done and the training becomes instinct. Fear loses its grip because preparation has already won.

Guinness World Records measured the wave at 51 feet, the biggest ever surfed by any blind person in history. But for me, it was never about a record. It was about what's possible when you refuse to let your circumstances define your limits.

The forbidden word

I was born into a house where the word 'can't' didn't exist. My brother, my sister, none of the Formston kids were allowed to say, 'I can't.' The fact that I was blind didn't exclude me from that. If you tried it, you'd be shut down immediately — not with anger, but with a question.

'Why can't you?'

My dad was a sales and marketing director. He spent his days in hard negotiations: managing teams, closing deals and having the difficult conversations that most people avoid. He was trained to push through objections. So, when his eight-year-old son said, 'I can't do that,' he didn't accept it. He leaned in.

When you have to explain why you can't do something, something shifts. You stop hiding behind the word; you start describing the

actual problem. And the moment you describe the problem, you start finding the solution.

One day, Dad and I were fishing. I was trying to tie a hook on thin line. With most fishing line, and thicker holes, I could feel my way through. But we were using small hooks and thin line. I asked him for help.

'No,' he said. 'You can do it.'

So, I found a process. I ran my fingers up the shaft of the hook and felt the way it was orientated. The hook curves one way, and the hole sits at 90 degrees to the direction of the hook. I pushed the line towards it, felt the hole and threaded the line through, then wove the line around the hook six times, found the hole, pushed back through and pulled tight. All by feel — no sight required.

Dad would talk me through problems rather than showing me or doing it for me. He'd help me break a big problem into small problems. What's the problem with tying the hook? Getting the line through the eye. What's the problem with that? Finding the hole. Okay, so how do you find the hole? At any part of the process, if I got stuck, he would talk me through it, and I found the solution myself.

That's where the whole *Why Not?* philosophy comes from. It's not a slogan. It's not motivational poster rubbish. It's the question that sat underneath every conversation in my childhood home. Dad would ask, 'Why can't you?', then I'd have to explain the actual problem and, in explaining it, I'd find the workaround.

'Can't' is a toxic, dangerous word that stops people in their tracks and removes their opportunity to develop capacity. The moment you say it, you've given yourself an excuse — permission to stop. But if you say, 'I don't know how to yet' or 'I haven't figured out a way,' that's a door that's still open.

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I've now gone full circle with that. I don't use the word 'can't'. I don't let my kids use it either. It's a principle that started with a fishing hook and a father who refused to let his blind son accept limitation.

This book is about keeping that door open.

The Hard Standards

Over the years, I've distilled everything I've learned into eight principles. I call them the Hard Standards.

Not frameworks. Not hacks. Not tips. Standards.

A standard is something you hold yourself to. It's non-negotiable. It's what you do when no one's watching. It's the version of you that exists at 3 am when there's no audience, no applause, no one to impress. There's a saying common in special forces: 'You don't rise to the occasion — you fall to the level of your training.' You don't suddenly step up and become superhuman; you default to the discipline you've drilled in the dark when nobody's watching.

Here are the eight Hard Standards, which I will share with you throughout this book:

- **Two Gears, One Engine.** Know when to go fast and when to go slow. You need both gears. The skill is knowing which one the moment demands.
- **Standards Without Consequences Are Just Wishes.** Rules only matter if they're enforced. If you set a standard for yourself and then let it slide, it was never a standard — it was a fuzzy dream. Accountability is everything.
- **The Bullshit Audit.** Brutal self-honesty. Who are you when no one's watching? Strip away the excuses, the stories you tell yourself, the comfortable lies. It's the hardest thing you'll ever do, and the most important.

- **The Hard Way Is the Easy Way.** There are no hacks. People spend their whole lives looking for shortcuts, and all they do is make their lives harder. The work you put in now makes your future self's life easier, as long as it's the right work.
- **The Future Is Already Real.** Declare your goal before you've earned it. Live in the reality of already being what you want to become. It's supposed to feel uncomfortable. That's how you know the dream is big enough.
- **Empathy Is a Superpower.** To lead others — in business, in sport, in family — you need to understand their whole life, not just their KPIs (key performance indicators). What's going on at home? What are they afraid of? What do they actually want? What are their dreams? Real leadership comes from understanding people completely.
- **Own Every Hat.** You're not one thing. You're a parent, a mate, an athlete, an executive, a partner. Each role is a different hat, and each hat deserves your full presence. Be the best version of yourself when wearing each hat.
- **Trust.** The eighth Hard Standard, trust, is the foundation and the amplifier of everything else. My formula for trust takes all the standards in this book and multiplies them into something consistent that lasts. Trust is something we'll build together throughout this book.

These standards didn't arrive in my life in a neat order. Some I learned as a kid. Some I didn't figure out until my thirties. This book won't feed them to you in a tidy sequence. You'll encounter them when they showed up for me: sometimes overlapping, sometimes colliding, always building on each other. By the end, you'll know them — not because I listed them, but because you've experienced them with me, through this book. And then, you will see how they can work for you, too.

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The fuel

The Hard Standards are tools, but tools don't work by themselves. You need fuel.

That fuel is 'Why Not?'

People are always asking me why. Why did you surf Nazaré? Why did you play rugby union when you're blind? Why did you play ice hockey when you're blind? Why would you sprint for a world championship finish at over 70 kilometres per hour on a bike you can't steer?

Not how. *Why*.

I find it offensive. The question implies I need to justify choosing to live fully — that blindness should have disqualified me from even trying. That the default assumption is limitation, and anything beyond that requires explanation.

My answer comes from somewhere deep — from the beaches and back streets of Narrabeen, a Northern Sydney beach suburb, in the 1990s, from a childhood where you either backed yourself or got left behind. I might be a senior businessman now — a parent, a husband, someone who knows when to speak carefully and professionally. But at my core, I'm still a rough-around-the-edges Aussie bloke. And my inner dialogue has never changed.

When someone asks why I did something they think I shouldn't have been able to do, my internal response is always the same:

Why the fuck wouldn't I?

Hard and soft

There's one more thing you need to understand before we begin.

This book is for anyone who needs permission to be both hard and soft: to be physically capable, strong, tough, able to endure pain,

without being rough or violent; and to be emotionally open, able to feel deeply, to cry when you encounter suffering, to let your heart break, without being physically weak or useless.

The world tells us we have to choose. We don't.

My dad has mesothelioma. Asbestos cancer. He's been put into palliative care. They gave him three options: aged care, living at home with Mum while they send people out when needed, or voluntary death. The man who gave me my frameworks, my philosophies, the standards that are in this book, he'll soon not be on this planet with us anymore.

When my parents told me, I choked up. My eyes filled with water. To hear that your dad — the guy who's given you most of your standards, the principles that have shaped your entire life — is going to die … it breaks you. The thought of holding his hand as he becomes a frail old man chokes me up when I talk about it. Write about it.

That's the marshmallow soft.

The next morning, I'll get up and do breath holds for longer than most people can focus on a YouTube clip. I'll lift weights to make sure my body can still take a beating from a giant wave. I'll drop into walls of water that can kill me. I'll stand in a boardroom and hold the line in a negotiation that could cost me my job.

That's the rock hard.

Both are true. Both are necessary. You can hold a dying man's hand and weep, then get up the next morning and train until your body screams. That's not contradiction. That's being fully human.

Your move

I work as an executive coach. I lead teams across multiple businesses. And I used to think leadership was about giving people answers, telling them what to do, showing them the way, handing over the solution. I was wrong.

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The most powerful coaching tool isn't providing answers—it's asking questions.

This book isn't going to tell you what to do. Instead, in this book I'm going to show you what I did—the mistakes, the wins, the rock bottoms, the breakthroughs. And along the way, I'm going to ask you questions. Hard questions. The kind I had to ask myself when I was sitting on that floor in Killara, realising I didn't deserve the life I was dreaming about.

Who are you? Who do you want to be? And what are you willing to do about it?

Your answers won't be the same as mine. They shouldn't be. You've got your own life, your own challenges, your own version of *Why Not?* But if you engage with the questions honestly, if you really sit with them, you'll find your own path.

That blind kid from Narrabeen who was told at five that his life was basically over is now a blind adult who is a four-time world champion surfer, a world champion cyclist and world record holder, featured in a Netflix documentary, a seasoned board director and business executive, a husband and father of three.

If I can do that, you can do whatever your version of that is.

You've got two choices: keep making excuses and let your dream future starve to death, or do the work, raise your standards and become the person who deserves the life you're imagining.

I know which one I chose.

The question is whether you've got the guts to stop lying to yourself.

So, turn the page. Stop waiting for permission. Stop feeding your excuses while your future starves.

Why the fuck not?

Chapter 1

Different, Not Over

Two Gears, One Engine

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> Know when to go fast and when to go slow. My parents taught me this before I could name it. Mum was relentless, always moving, walking so fast through shopping centres that my sister Jacqui and I had to run to keep up. Get it done and move to the next thing. Dad was the opposite: measure twice, cut once; work it out and make a plan before you act. I needed both gears to survive what was coming.

The flat metal electrodes slid under my eyelids like thin strips of cold foil. Even before they turned the machine on, it was painful — itchy, sharp, wrong. I was five years old, sitting rigid in a hospital chair while strangers attached wires to my eyes.

Then came the heavy steel helmet, like something from an old deep-sea-diving movie — the kind you'd expect to see at the bottom of a fish tank, not strapped to a child's head. As it came towards my face, I felt dread. Not fear, exactly — I was resigned to the fact that it was going to happen. Just dread, and a feeling of darkness closing in as the helmet went over my head.

The weight pressed down. My world shrank to blackness and the sound of my own breathing, fast and shallow inside that metal shell.

'Stay still,' they said. Then they flicked the switch.

The electricity pulsed through the electrodes, surging behind my eyes in waves I couldn't control. My eyelids twitched against my will. I gripped the arms of the chair, knuckles white, but I didn't cry.

I don't remember the last time I cried from physical pain. I think it was before I was five. After that, I just stopped. Physical pain would never make me cry again: not broken bones, not stitches, not any of it. Physical toughness was the household standard, with a dad who breathed through the pain and never cried, and an older, rugby-playing brother. But emotional pain was different. I wouldn't allow myself to cry from that either — not until my dog Oscar died when I was in my mid-teens. And after Oscar, I didn't cry again until my friend Andy Mac died. Those were the only two times for years. It would take decades, and a lot of hard work on myself, before I'd have the bravery to let my heart fully open, to feel everything without armour, to cry at the things that moved me rather than just the things that destroyed me. That softness came later. After Bex. After the kids. After I'd finally earned it.

But that's getting ahead of the story.

In that chair, I felt less like a child and more like a crash test dummy — a small body wired to a machine so adults could collect data.

The doctors weren't cruel; they were clinical. That was the problem. No one looked at me like a boy who might be scared. I was an interesting case. A puzzle to solve.

Let me tell you how a five-year-old ended up strapped to that chair.

I was born with perfect sight. I was a healthy baby with no complications, no flags, no indication that anything would ever change. For the first five years of my life, I saw the world the way everyone else did: colours, faces, distance, detail.

I grew up in Narrabeen, in the Northern Beaches region of Sydney. Honestly, it was about as Aussie as it gets. The lake was our backyard. You'd step out the back door, walk 20 metres across patchy grass, and your feet would be in the water. Narrabeen Lake wasn't scenery. It was part of the family.

Stu, my half-brother, was 13 years older than me — more like a young uncle than a sibling in those early years. He introduced me to surfing, and he played high-level rugby union and ice hockey. Jacqui arrived three years after me, close enough to be my partner in crime and sibling frenemy. We were the self-appointed pirates of Narrabeen Lake, using its nearby island as our base — where we would build huts and watch out for 'intruders'. The island had a few acres of bush and was visible from the house, and it sat 50 metres across the water so it was easy to get to.

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Before Jacqui came along, Mum and Dad used to swim laps around the island with me hanging on to Dad's neck. I was tiny, just a baby really, but Dad would tuck my arms securely around his neck while they swam the full circuit. Some parents put their kids in prams and pushed them around the block. Mine strapped me to their backs and swam.

There's a story they've told me a thousand times. I was two years old when I just let go of Dad's neck mid-swim. Instead of sinking or panicking, I pushed away from him and started paddling towards the shore of the island while Mum and Dad freaked out behind me. After that, it became a game. I'd stand on the sand watching them swim towards me, then launch myself in and paddle out to meet them. I embraced freedom before I even knew what the word meant. I trusted in my own body before anyone had told me what my body could or couldn't do.

That lake taught me confidence long before sport ever did. Looking back now, I can see how those early experiences planted seeds that

would grow into my relationship with the ocean, with cycling, with pushing my body to limits others said were impossible.

The last clear memory

One of the clearest memories from those early years, before I turned five and was legally blind, happened at a Christmas barbecue. All the families from the neighbourhood were gathered in someone's backyard, sausages sizzling, kids running everywhere, adults standing around with beers in hand.

As the sun went down and the sky turned from orange to purple to a deep, velvety black, one of the dads gathered all the kids together on the back lawn. 'Come on,' he said, 'let's see if we can spot Santa in the sky.'

So we all looked up, staring into the night: a bunch of little kids with sticky fingers from the pavlova and wide eyes full of wonder.

And then we saw it. A streak of light shooting across the sky, bright and sharp against the darkness.

In that moment, it was Santa. It was magic. We all gasped. Some of the kids cheered. I just stood there, frozen, watching the sky with my whole heart open.

What makes that memory so powerful now is that it's the last time I remember seeing anything clearly. I can still picture it — thousands of tiny dots, crisp and distinct against the black. Sharp edges. Clear lines. I can still feel the damp grass under my bare feet.

From that point on, everything blurred into everything else. There were no clear lines. The world became like bold cartoon character shapes with fuzzy outlines and no internal detail. When I think about trees, I know they have depth to their leaves, texture on their bark, but I have no memory of ever seeing that. Everything after that Christmas sky became shapes without edges, colours without definition.

The changes to my vision crept up on me during car trips. We used to play I Spy to pass the time — we had no devices back then, and I couldn't read, so games were everything. Jacqui would say, 'I spy with my little eye something beginning with L.' The answer was leaves. But by then I couldn't see a leaf unless it was inches from my face. I had to start imagining what could be out there rather than actually seeing it with my little eyes.

I would often sit there after a game, staring at nothing, thinking about how broken my eyes were. I never compared myself to others. I never felt sorry for myself. But in that moment, I just hated my disability.

Jacqui did what young kids do — she played on the fact that I couldn't see things. She'd pick random stuff I could never imagine. Not leaves, sky, road — the obvious things people use. Specific things, such as 'orange tractor'. And I Spy is one game where you're fucked if someone chooses something you can't see.

I had my memory and it was powerful. I could work out maps and strategies to bridge the gap created by my disability. But playing I Spy exposed the gap every single time.

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The picture chart

I didn't know anything was wrong. I was just a kid in kindergarten, more interested in kicking balls around than anything else. But my teacher had started noticing things. She'd draw a duck on the blackboard and I'd tell her I couldn't see it. She thought I was mucking around.

Then one day, a lady walked into the classroom and started taking small groups of students outside for eye tests. Eventually, my name was called and a group of us headed outside. On the back of a door was a picture chart — simple shapes instead of letters. A house at the

top, big and clear. Below it, a tree, an elephant, a monkey. Each row got smaller.

The other kids went first. 'House. Tree. Elephant. Monkey. Truck.' They were nailing it.

By the time it was my turn, I'd already adapted. Without even thinking about it, I'd listened to what they said and memorised the pattern. So, when she asked me to read the chart, I proudly called out the answers.

But I wasn't looking anywhere near the chart.

Something shifted in her face. She pointed to a random picture in the middle. 'And what's this one?' I could see only blurry dots, shapes without definition. I guessed. Wrong. She pointed to another. Wrong again.

That moment changed the course of my life. She contacted my parents, urging them to take me to Sydney Eye Hospital.

The diagnosis

I wasn't in the consulting room when my parents received my diagnosis. They sent me out to play in the hallway while the adults talked. I remember feeling mostly confused. Bored. There were other kids out there, and I was thinking about games, about what everyone else was doing while I was stuck at this hospital. I had FOMO before the word existed. I just wanted to get back to playing, to doing what normal kids did. The tests felt like an annoyance more than anything else. I didn't understand their significance.

Inside that room, Mum and Dad sat across from a professor of ophthalmology. His words were clinical, definitive. Macular dystrophy. Progressive. Incurable. He told them I would lose most of my sight. That I would be legally blind. That they should prepare themselves — and prepare me — for a limited life.

By age six, my visual acuity was around 6/120, meaning that if I stood six metres from a stop sign, I would only see what someone with perfect vision could see from 120 metres away. This diagnosis relating to my peripheral vision came as part of my original diagnosis. As a separate point, my central vision has never shown me the middle of anything. When I look directly at an object or a face, the centre vanishes completely. There isn't a black patch or a shadow — there's nothing. To actually 'see' something, I've always had to look out of the sides of my eyes. The images on the next page show the change. The top shows a healthy macula, while the middle photo shows how mine look. The bottom image offer a side-by-side comparison.

At age five, I had five per cent peripheral vision and no central vision. Today, I have less than three per cent peripheral vision.

You can see it in our family photos. Before five, I'd been looking straight at the camera. After five, I was looking everywhere but at it. The diagnosis gave it a name, but the photos had been telling the story for years.

The car ride home was strange. Mum and Dad were talking too much, too brightly, pointing out things through the window like tour guides. 'Look at that dog!' 'Oh, there's the ice cream shop!' I was five; I wasn't stupid. I could feel the weight of what they *weren't* saying pressing against the windows of that car.

Later that day, after trying to hold it together for me during that car ride home, my dad went to a meeting to pitch for a whole-of-business beverage partnership — a major contract he was close to signing. Mid-negotiation, he stood up and walked out with no explanation. As he later said to me, he felt his whole world was falling away beneath him.

Mum and Dad gave me two different things, both essential, and they both run through everything I do. As I navigated my diagnosis, I realised how important these two 'gears' were going to be in my life.

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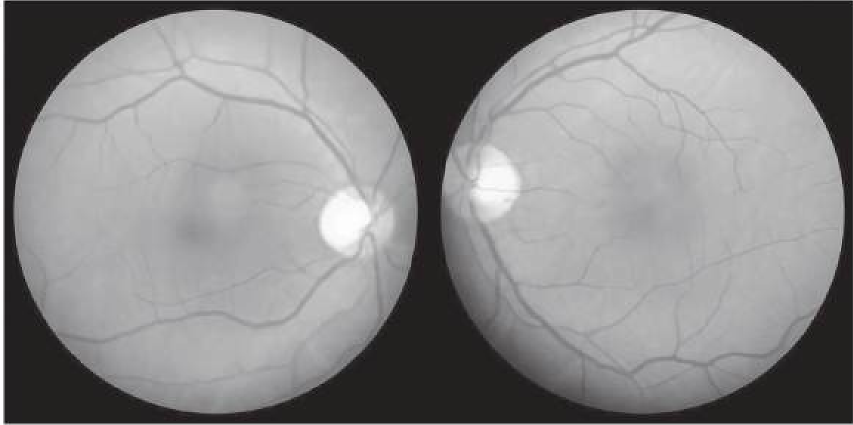

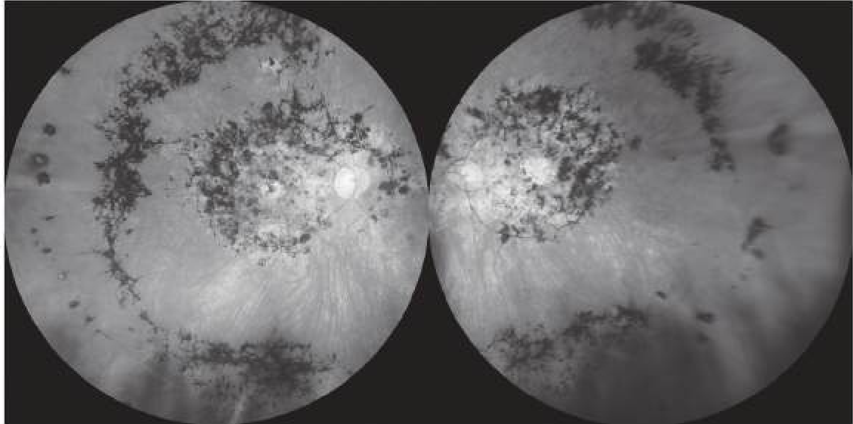

Dad was slow and deliberate. He considered everything carefully. If you were going to do something, you worked it out first, made a plan and then acted. No rushing. No half-arsing anything. He didn't make speeches about it — he lived it. Every job done right or done again. Every commitment honoured. Every shortcut rejected.

He never said, 'I love you.' Not once. He grew up in a different time, when men showed love through presence and provision, not words.

Mum was the opposite. Fast. Relentless. The hardest worker I've ever known. She never stopped. Still hasn't. At 77, she still walks faster than anyone I know. As kids, we'd have to walk then run to keep up with her at the shopping centre. Her legs just kept moving, like time was something you respected by using it. Even now, Jacqui and I still do that half-walk, half-run to keep pace with her. This constant motion taught me that time isn't something you waste. You use it for fun or you use it to create value. But you never just let it pass. That urgency still runs through me, the sense that every minute is building towards something and you need to appreciate it before it's gone.

Mum ran her hairdressing business from home. There was always someone sitting under a dryer, always the sound of women laughing. The house smelled of hairspray and biscuits. And Mum told me she loved me constantly. Without hesitation. Without condition. She'd say it when I left for school, when I came home, before bed — love wasn't something to be earned in her world. It just was.

Dad was the slow gear: process over speed. Mum was the fast gear: get it done, move to the next thing, never stop.

Most people have one gear. They're either careful or they're fast. They're either planners or they're doers. I learned to be both — to use both gears. It meant I could be the executive who can slow down for a critical decision *and* be decisive when momentum matters. The athlete who can be patient in training *and* explosive in competition. Two gears, one engine. That's what my parents gave me.

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Between the two of them, I learned that strength and softness weren't opposites. Dad taught me that standards are the backbone of respect — for yourself and others. Mum taught me that love doesn't need to be rationed or earned and that time is a resource you either use or lose. I learned how to shift from slow and deliberate to fast and urgent depending on what the moment demands.

That duality started in a house that smelled of sawdust and hairspray, with a father who taught me to slow down and plan, and a mother who taught me to move fast and never stop.

The drop saw

Dad believed everyone should know how to use tools, including me. My eyesight was fading, but he never once used that as a reason to hold me back.

The drop saw wasn't just another tool in the garage; it was the line between childhood tinkering and real responsibility. Even switched off, it had a presence. Heavy. Solid. Capable of doing real damage if you were careless.

The first time Dad introduced me to it, when I was 13 years old, he didn't sugar-coat anything. 'Alright mate, this one demands respect. It'll cut timber clean … and it'll cut fingers just as quick if you get sloppy.'

Most parents would've packed the saw away at that point. But Dad wasn't trying to protect me from the challenge — he was preparing me for it.

He flicked the saw on, and the garage filled with the high-pitched whine of the blade. Sawdust hit the air. The vibration travelled through the floorboards into my chest. I couldn't see any of it clearly, but I felt everything.

'So tell me,' he said, 'what's the real danger here?'

'The blade … my hands.'

'Good. And what's not a danger?'

'The sound. Being scared.'

'Exactly. Noise isn't risk. Losing focus is risk.'

Then he taught me the process. The exact one I still use today, thousands of cuts later.

Because I can't rely on sight, everything starts with feel. My right hand finds the measurement point on the timber. I lock my finger there and that finger becomes the marker. Then my left hand drops the saw down until the blade just touches the wood. I slide the timber over until my right finger is resting against the cold edge of the blade itself. The cold edge of that metal against my skin tells me exactly where the cut will happen.

Then I let the saw back up with my left hand. Left hand moves to lock the timber in place. Right hand comes off the wood, moves to the handle, finger near the trigger. I pause. Double-check that I've followed every step. Nothing skipped. Nothing assumed.

Then I pull the trigger.

The motor kicks. There's this jolt — an electrical feeling that shoots up my right hand as the blade spins up. I know now that's just nerves firing, adrenaline responding to the sound and vibration. But as a kid, it felt like the saw was alive.

I drop the blade. The cut happens. Clean.

To this day, I still relish how risky this process is. I take it deadly serious every single time. The sound of the offcut dropping off the right side of the saw can make you jump. A few times it's landed on my foot and almost made me flinch. But I prepare for all of it. That's why I don't make mistakes.

'See?' Dad said to me the first time I made a cut with the drop saw. 'It's not about having perfect vision. It's about having a perfect process. Do it right and you remove the risk. Do it sloppy and you create it.'

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Process beats panic. That's what Dad was teaching me. When you can't control what you see, control what you do. When you can't eliminate the danger, build a system that manages it. Step by step, every time. No shortcuts.

While Dad wasn't someone who said 'I love you,' he showed his love for me during that first drop saw lesson. I didn't know it then, but I'd use the framework he taught me that day for the rest of my life. In velodromes. On 50-foot waves. In boardrooms. The specifics change, but the principle never does.

The tinny

The drop saw taught me that danger could be managed with process. The lake taught me that freedom was the reward for earning trust.

After my diagnosis, the one thing that felt jarring was when my parents told me I'd never get a driver's licence. That felt weird at the time. Parents drove cars; kids didn't drive cars. I remember thinking that I didn't really care. But I wouldn't have wanted to lose my freedom on the water.

Dad had bought me a little aluminium tinny when I was five — a small rowboat. I used to row it everywhere with oars. When I was approaching 10 years old, he upgraded the tinny to have a two-horsepower motor. But he didn't just hand over the starting rope. 'The propeller doesn't care if it's water, rope or your arm,' he said. 'Explain to me how you'll manage the risk. Then you can use it.'

Freedom, but tied to responsibility. That was always the deal.

The little motor didn't have a spring recoil, so I had to wind the rope around the top of the motor to get it started. Every time. Wind it tight, brace myself, pull hard. Sometimes it took three or four tries before it coughed to life. But that ritual became part of the process, part of earning the freedom that came after.

The moment the motor fired up, I lost most of my echolocation, which I used to orient myself and stay safe. The constant drone of the motor swallowed the sounds I relied on — the lap of water against the shore, the birds marking distance, the acoustic signatures that told me where I was. All I could do was scan the front of the boat with whatever vision I had. Shapes appeared maybe five metres ahead. That was it.

I was terrified of hitting someone: partly because I didn't want to hurt anyone, but also because I knew that if I ever hurt anyone or hurt myself, Dad would take the boat away. And that boat was my independence — my freedom. The fear of losing it kept me vigilant. Every trip out, I scanned constantly, adjusted my angle, kept the motor low. Process over panic. Just like the drop saw.

The lake became the place where I proved, mostly to myself, that capability was about far more than vision. Capability relied on technique, patience and repetition. The tinny was my first taste of real independence, and I'd earned it by showing I could manage the risk.

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Defiance by day, terror by night

The shame of being different started the day of diagnosis and burrowed deep. I did anything I could to hide my blindness: I would disguise it, pretend it wasn't real, ignore it. I refused help. I refused accommodations. I refused to admit I couldn't see what everyone else could see.

But something else was growing alongside that shame. Something harder. More defiant.

I loved climbing trees throughout my childhood. I remember being as young as four or five and climbing trees higher than everyone else — so high it was seriously dangerous. Branches would snap and I'd land on branches beneath me, luckily. My mates would watch from the ground, shaking their heads.

'There's no way you'd climb that high if you could see the ground,' they'd say.

And I'd think: *exactly.*

That was my first way of defying my diagnosis and proving I wasn't blind. If I could climb higher than you, run faster than you, take bigger risks than you, then obviously I wasn't limited. Obviously I wasn't broken. Obviously the professor was wrong.

It was reckless logic. Dangerous, even. But it was also the first spark of something that would define my entire life: the refusal to let anyone else's expectations become my ceiling.

But here's the thing about defiance: it's a daytime emotion.

Every Monday night, around the time I was 10–12 years old, Dad went out. He was the Secretary at the local Rotary Club, and before he left, he'd look at me and say: 'You're the man of the house tonight. Make sure you keep the girls safe.'

He was probably joking — trying to make me feel like an adult, give me a sense of responsibility. But I took it literally.

I'd nod seriously. I was ready. The protector.

Then he'd leave, and I'd lie rigid in bed, barely breathing, cataloguing every sound. The creak of the house settling. The scratch of a branch against the window. The tick of the clock that somehow got louder after dark. I was supposed to protect Mum and Jacqui, but I couldn't see past my own doorway. Every shadow was a threat I couldn't identify. Every noise was evidence of something coming.

In my imagination, the boogeyman lived in my cupboard. He waited outside my window. He existed in every shadow I couldn't see clearly, every sound I couldn't explain.

I never told anyone how scared I was. I was supposed to be protecting the girls. I was the man of the house. But inside, I was a terrified little boy lying rigid in the dark, waiting for the sound of Dad coming home.

Looking back now, as someone who takes professional risks for a living, I understand what those nights were teaching me. The unknown is always the most terrifying thing. The boogeyman in the cupboard is terrifying precisely because he's unknown. Once you have data — once you open the cupboard door and see there's nothing there — the fear dissolves. But a young boy doesn't know what he doesn't know. He just lies there, shaking, waiting for the familiar sound of his dad coming home.

Climbing trees to prove I wasn't broken, then lying awake convinced the darkness was coming for me: that became the pattern that would define my life. I wasn't choosing between hard and soft, but learning to be both.

I didn't know it then, but the duality I kept encountering was the gift. Hard and soft; slow and fast; two gears, one engine.

By the time I was six, I hadn't learned the full meaning of resilience yet — but I was living inside the structure of it. Mum and Dad weren't waiting for the world to adjust to me. They were quietly teaching me how to adjust to the world with grit, creativity and the belief that 'different' was never going to mean 'less'.

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Rejecting limitation

After the electrode test — that pulsing, claustrophobic nightmare — Mum later told me something shifted inside her. Not fear. Conviction.

'In that room,' she said, 'watching them wire you up like an experiment, I realised these people saw a case study. I saw my son. And I decided right then that no one would ever write your story but us.'

Dad, normally so calm, had been visibly rattled. He told me years later: 'I knew one thing walking out of that hospital. Advice is one thing. Direction is another. And no one, not even a professor, gets to direct your future.'

They weren't rejecting medicine — they were rejecting limitation. The diagnosis was real. The prognosis was a story and they refused to let someone else write it.

They didn't know what the future held, but they knew it would be my future to forge.

In his garage, with the drop saw, Dad had taught me that process beats panic. He didn't know he was giving me a framework that would carry me through world championships, into corporate boardrooms and across waves that could kill me. He just knew that a blind kid with a reliable process was safer than a sighted kid with none.

That lesson would be tested soon enough. School was about to teach me that not everyone plays by the same rules. Trees don't tease you. Trees don't hold up fingers and laugh when you guess wrong. Trees don't notice that your books are eight times the size of everyone else's.

Kids do.

And they were watching.

The US Navy SEALs have a saying: 'Slow is smooth and smooth is fast.' It's a principle drilled into every operator — the understanding that rushing leads to mistakes, while deliberate action leads to speed. What separates the operators who survive from those who don't isn't raw talent or physical gifts. It's process. The SEALs call it 'front-loading the work' — taking time to build the system so that when the pressure hits, you don't think, you execute. Dad didn't know SEAL methodology. But he was teaching me the same thing in his garage.

Which gear are you stuck in? And what is it costing you?

LEARN THE EIGHT HARD STANDARDS. FORGED AT ROCK BOTTOM. TESTED WHERE IT COUNTS.

Matt Formston can't see the 51-foot Nazaré wave that earned him a Guinness World Record. He can't see the waves on which he's won world surfing titles, or the finish lines he's crossed to win world cycling titles. He can't see the boardroom he's led for fifteen years. But blindness was never his biggest fight. Almost ending up dead or in jail was.

Why Not? is the story behind Matt's determination to build a limitless life, and the Eight Hard Standards that helped him get there. Pressure-tested in elite sport and senior corporate leadership, since finding them he's won a world title or a major business award every single year.

Honest, sometimes uncomfortable and full of practical insights, *Why Not?* shows you what it actually takes to perform when getting it wrong has real consequences:

- Move when fear says wait.
- Audit yourself before the world does it for you.
- Build capacity until performance becomes instinct.
- Lead with empathy and understand what motivates.
- Live as the person you're trying to become.

The excuses stop here. It's time to ask: why not?

MATT FORMSTON AM is a four-time Surfing World Champion, a Para Track Cycling World Champion and a Rio Paralympian. He holds a Guinness World Record for surfing a 51-foot wave at Nazaré, and in 2023 became the first para athlete in history to win Surfing Australia's open Heavy Water Award. He has spent fifteen years in senior corporate leadership and now speaks globally on performance, leadership and trust. His story is told in *The Blind Sea*, now streaming on Netflix.

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