



# The Road Back:

## Jordan Rapp '98, Triathlete

On March 23, 2010, Jordan Rapp ('98) was riding his bike. And then he wasn't. Rapp, a Princeton graduate and professional triathlete, was on a training ride not far from his home in Thousand Oaks, California, north of Los Angeles. He glanced up at a stoplight a few hundred yards ahead and figured he would be done with his fifteen-minute sprint interval by the time he reached it. Then he collided with a van making a reckless turn onto the road in front of him. The driver sped off, leaving Rapp on the side of the road, crumpled, unconscious, and bleeding profusely from two severed jugular veins in his neck. The next thing he remembers is waking up in a hospital bed two days later.

Jordan was a year behind me at Hackley, and though we played lacrosse together and were friendly, we

fell out of touch. But I became a journalist, writing often for publications like *Outside* magazine, where triathlon has occasionally been part of my beat, and once Jordan began to emerge as one of the top-ranked Americans at the elite, Ironman level, news of his success reached me via sources in that world, starting in 2009. That year, having found that the grueling Ironman distance—a 2.4-mile swim and 112-mile bike ride followed by a full marathon—suited him, he won both the Ironman Arizona and Ironman Canada races. His 2010 race season was just getting underway when the accident happened, and it wasn't long before the grim news worked its way down the digital grapevine to my computer. And though the accident was horrible, what happened in the moments and months afterwards proved inspirational.

As Jordan lay on the side of the road bleeding—he'd eventually lose nearly three liters of blood—a Navy Seabee named Tom Sanchez, stationed at the Ventura County Naval Base and about to ship out to Afghanistan, saw others stopped on the side of the road and pulled over to help. He used gauze from a combat vest he had in his car to stanch the blood gushing from Jordan's neck, likely saving his life. Rapp was in the hospital for eighteen days and faced months of recuperation and rehabilitation. In addition to the damaged veins and arteries in his neck, he had sustained a variety of cuts, several broken bones, and severe nerve damage in his left biceps. Nonetheless, he soon voiced a goal: to be race-ready in time to defend his title in the Ironman Arizona that November. It seemed, even to him, an extreme long shot. But then there he was at the start line in Tempe, Arizona, having battled back to race shape, his wife Jill, both their families, and Sanchez there to cheer him on. It wasn't until the race was nearly over that the emotion of the day welled up. He crossed the finish line in fourth place with tears streaming down his face.

I remember on the lacrosse field at Hackley not having a good sense of Jordan at first. I was a senior defenseman and he was my new goalie. We were an undermanned, young team, and he was, to me, one unknown quantity among many. He worked hard and showed glimpses of the fearlessness you want in a goalie, but he seemed a little awkward, tense with nervous energy and long-limbed like a stork. It was a frustrating season—we lacked a real offense, which meant we spent three-quarters of every game on defense—but as we struggled through the season, eventually I understood what I'd failed to grasp about Jordan at first: the depth of his tenacity, his intense desire to win, and, for better or worse, his stubbornness. He was, I finally saw, less stork than mule.

His post-Hackley path, outlined in the conversation below, makes clear the value of that mulish streak. Though not by design, we spoke on the one-year anniversary of his accident, with Jordan having just returned from the Abu Dhabi International Triathlon.



Jordan at the finish of the Ironman Arizona 2010. Photo by Kerry Yndestad.

**TIM SOHN:** It's been a while, Jordan.

**JORDAN RAPP:** Too long. Years.

**TS:** But I'm sure your experiences with sports at Hackley are at the root of all your subsequent athletic success. I say that jokingly, but can you walk me through your progression, from sports at Hackley to becoming a rower at Princeton?

**JR:** I think high school was certainly a big part of it. I went to Princeton hoping to walk-on to the lacrosse team. I sort of felt like I was good enough, so then when I didn't make the team it was like, well, now what? I actually went out for lightweight football, but they were awful. And at the same time, I had some friends that were rowers, and Princeton rowing is a winning tradition. It reminded me of those Hackley football T-shirts that say "A Winning Tradition," or when we played lacrosse together: Hackley was expected to win, and having grown up in that, I expected to win when I did a sport, so that was part of what drew me to rowing. That, and it was a sport where I felt if I went out and I worked really hard, then that would be rewarded.



Competing at Abu Dhabi. Photo by Ryan Bowd.



Photo by Dee Boys.



Jordan at the end of the Arizona Ironman in November 2010, greeting his mother, Hackley trustee Diane Rapp. Photo by Kerry Yndestad.

**TS: Was your complete lack of experience a factor?**

**JR:** It was sort of like when I played football my senior year at Hackley—I'd never played, but it was what I always wanted to do and I finally convinced my parents by telling them I'd probably never get on the field—and I ended up having a great time. I think a lot of it was Coach Pickert. And I found something similar in my rowing coaches: a real commitment to winning and a sense of support and a huge welcome despite the fact that I didn't really "belong" there. But of course when I first started I was sort of the weak link. I wasn't as good on the rowing machine, I wasn't good on the water, and there were no teammates to cover for my weaknesses. So my freshman year of rowing was really rough, but in a lot of ways I think it was good because it prompted me to work harder to find a way to at least get up to par.

**TS:** It's interesting because it seems somewhat similar to your start in triathlons, finding your way almost accidentally to a thing that ends up being really positive but getting there and having no technique, just a lot of enthusiasm. Is that about right?

**JR:** Yeah, I mean, I joked once on my blog that everything that I found that I really have fond memories of I found through failure. Like I found rowing because I sort of failed at lacrosse and I found triathlons because I failed at rowing and...

**TS: That's sort of a harsh way to judge it, I think. It was a rib injury that led you to triathlon, right?**

**JR:** Yeah, I was trying to make the national team and I think I was a little bit on the cusp. I was still a relatively inexperienced rower, and I was pushing myself way too hard and wound up injured. And then when I couldn't row, I needed to do something to stay fit anyway and triathlon seemed like a good option. I was already riding my bike for cross training, I was a competent swimmer, I was a competent runner, so I started with a basic triathlon training framework. I always expected to go back to rowing and then I just kind of got bitten by the triathlon bug, and the fact that I did well I think helped a lot. I was like—oh, I'm actually good at this.

**TS: How long from when you started training until you did your first triathlon?**

**JR:** There was race in Harriman State Park that was short. It was just a sprint race and so I started with that race. Triathlon is very race-focused: you can be a runner and never go run a marathon, but with triathlon, you train in order to race. I think I started training in early April of 2003 and then that race was the first weekend in June of 2003.

**TS: How did you do?**

**JR:** I came sixth and won my age group by some big margin. It was pretty cool. At the same time it was a tiny, tiny local race. It was a great feeling, but looking back on it now, I didn't realize how meaningless it was, which was probably a good thing. I joke that my success in triathlon has been a byproduct of ignorance. Same thing with my first Ironman: I thought, Ok, I'll race the Ironman, but I had no idea what that was really even all about because I just decided to do at the last minute.

**TS: What was the longest race you'd done before that first Ironman?**

**JR:** That was 2007, so at that point I had been doing triathlons for about four years, and in retrospect I was certainly ready. I had turned pro in 2006, but it wasn't until early 2007, when I packed up my car and drove to Flagstaff for three months of training with the Canadian National Team, that things really started to click. I had won my first real prize money, and things were going well, but still the longest race that I had done was basically a three-quarter Ironman, and I certainly hadn't prepared for an Ironman. But another race got cancelled and I called some people at Ironman Canada and they let me in and the race organizer was like—listen, we let you in, don't make a fool of yourself. And I did the race and came off the bike in 3rd and ended up finishing 5th. And then it was like okay, I can do Ironman, I'm good at that. This is what I really was meant to do, it just took me a long time to figure it out.

**TS: Why is that the right distance for you?**

**JR:** Partly it's just a long day and you have so much time. Until you get to Ironman, you can get by on speed, but in Ironman you have to be smart. You have to make smart decisions and that was the first time that being smarter than a lot of these guys actually made a difference.

**TS: So that was 2007, and then 2008 was really kind of your breakout year, when you finished third in the Ironman Arizona—twice, right?**

**JR:** Right, the first was in April, and coming into the finish I was actually in fourth. But nobody wants to be fourth. Fourth is the guy that doesn't get to stand on the podium and do all that fun stuff. And I remember somebody was shouting at me, "He's right there!" And so I sprinted—as much as one can sprint in an Ironman—and I ended up catching the guy with about 200 meters to go. And then they decided to run that race again in November that year, and I went back and I swam well and I biked well and I led the run for about 18 miles against a really good field and then finished third. In that sense, 2008 was the year I proved I belonged.

**TS: And that Arizona race continued to be an important one for you—you went back in 2009 and won it, right?**

**JR:** Yeah, 2009 was really my big year. I came 4th at Wildflower which is a big half-Ironman early in the year and I raced really well there against a really good field and then I won Ironman Canada that summer in the second fastest time and then I won Arizona in November and set a course record. That was the year when I finally arrived on everyone else's radar.

**TS: And then 2010, the season was just getting underway, and then....**

**JR:** Yeah, it was a year ago today: I was out riding, and I had had a great run in the morning and a great swim and I was having a great ride and I was about to race in Oceanside, and I thought I'm going to do well at this race, this is going to be a great season, it's going to be just like last season only better. Then I ran into the side of a car.



Jordan Rapp with CPO Thomas Sanchez, the Naval officer who saved his life, at the Arizona Ironman 2010.

**TS: It wasn't intentional that this interview fall on the one year anniversary of the accident, but is that something you've been thinking about today? Did you wake up this morning and think, a year ago today that happened?**

**JR:** It was more yesterday because it happened on the Tuesday after I had come back from Abu Dhabi and then yesterday was the Tuesday after I got back from Abu Dhabi—triathlon training is boring, very predictable, so the workouts that I had yesterday were very, very similar to the workouts that I had that Tuesday after Abu Dhabi last year. I was out riding my bike yesterday, and I was thinking wow, this is almost exactly what I was doing when that happened. It felt good to finish the ride, put the bike in the car and drive home and be like, okay, I'm home. I made it.

**TS: Do you still ride that route?**

**JR:** No. I almost never ride that far south anymore. I think that the roads that I found now, I do think they are safer than what I used to ride. I don't think that what I used to ride was dangerous but I think the roads that I ride now are very, very safe.

**TS: What's your last memory of that morning pre-crash, pre-accident?**

**JR:** I remember I was riding and I looked up and I saw the traffic light at South State University Channel Island, and I was finishing up a fifteen-minute, race-based interval and I thought I should be done by the time I hit that traffic light which would be good because I won't ride through a red light. I remember thinking it would be good if I was finished by the time I hit that light, and that's the last thing I remember.

**TS: And it was at that light or before that light that you got hit?**

**JR:** It was about 500 meters before that light.

**TS: Your next memory is in the hospital bed?**

**JR:** Yeah.

**TS: As it became clear to you the extent of the injuries and what had happened, were you thinking in triathlon terms at that point or were you thinking in happy to be alive terms?**

**JR:** No, I thought for sure I was done with triathlon. Not so much that I didn't think I would heal from these injuries, but I thought, I just almost got killed riding my bike. Are you kidding me? I'm never going to ride my bike ever again.

**“I remember going to watch Wildflower in May...I remember that was the first time I told anyone that I wanted to do Ironman Arizona in November. Everybody thought I was crazy.”—jordan rapp**



Photo by Kevin Koresky.

**TS: And then from there how long was it before you started thinking maybe you could ride your bike again?**

**JR:** I think there was a lot of back and forth. It was a lot of up and down. There would be days where it's like okay, I'm going to come back and I'm going to make a comeback and I'm going to race and I'm going to prove that I can do this and there were other days where it was like oh my god, this is an enormous thing. At first it was that sense of I'm alive so nothing else matters, so you don't really take stock of how badly damaged you are. I had no real sense in the hospital how damaged I was and it wasn't really until I was allowed to get in the pool that I realized. I couldn't even hold a kickboard because of my broken collarbone, and I wasn't allowed to run because I was on blood thinners and I wasn't allowed to bike for the same reason.

**TS: How hard was it to sit still?**

**JR:** It's about a 5k loop around our neighborhood and I would walk that a lot at like one in the morning. I couldn't sleep. I would be at my computer reading the news or something, and then I would go for a walk.

**TS: Was there a point at which you made a conscious decision to say I'm going to work back towards training or did it just evolve in that direction as you recuperated and rehabbed?**

**JR:** I remember going to watch Wildflower in May, where I was supposed to race. That was what kicked off a really great season in 2009 and I think being there and seeing that race made me want to race again. I remember that was the first time I told anyone that I wanted to do Ironman Arizona in November. Everybody thought I was crazy. I'm sure nobody took me seriously. I don't even know I was being serious, I just needed to say something. I really didn't want to say—this whole year is going to a write off. A year seemed so long.

**TS: You had essentially a two-month layoff, is that right?**

**JR:** It was really a three-month layoff. I sort of started swimming a little bit I think the second week in May. Then when I was allowed to start running, I promptly did way too much and injured myself and then had to stop running. As soon as they told me I could run I think I ran twelve days straight and then immediately I hurt myself.

**TS: Did you have any trepidation about getting back on the bike?**

**JR:** I thought that as soon as they told me I could ride I'd be out there. But it took me four days after they told me I could ride again before I actually rode. I rode for the first time on July 4th. I was really nervous. The hardest part was the first 30 seconds of riding, just rolling away from the driveway. After I was out of sight of the driveway it was fine, but getting on the bike was one of the hardest parts.



Jill and Jordan at the Arizona Ironman 2010.

**TS:** And then of course you made it back to race in Arizona in November. The emotion of that day must have been intense: coming back to a race that you'd won the year before, at the end of such a long recovery, with your wife and family there watching, as well as Tom Sanchez, the man who saved your life after the accident and who had just gotten back from a deployment in Afghanistan. Was it hard to focus on the race?

**JR:** I felt very race ready, and I didn't really think too much about any of that stuff until probably the last mile of the race. Until that point I was focused on just racing and then finally the last mile it was like oh my god, it was really a trip to get here. I think if you see any of the photos at the finish I was crying, because that's when it really all hit me, when I didn't have to race anymore and I could think about what had happened.

**TS:** Looking forward—this season, beyond, life—what's on the horizon?

**JR:** I would say the biggest thing, my wife, Jill, is now just over six months pregnant so we'll have our first little one in mid-June and so I think that's a whole—hopefully I know enough to know that I know nothing about what that will mean. That's a big thing.

**TS:** At what age can we expect the child to enter his or her first triathlon?

**JR:** I don't know. It's funny because triathlon is how Jill and I met, and obviously it's important to us, but I don't think either of us has any desire to force them to be a triathlete if they don't want to be. I think that we both found triathlon because we wanted to and I think that's what we're going to hopefully be able to pass on: finding whatever it is that you want to do, and doing it.

Tim Sohn was Salutatorian of the Hackley Class of 1997 and was named to Hackley's chapter of the Cum Laude Society. Earning All Ivy League recognition in both football and lacrosse, he captained both teams his senior year. A graduate of Harvard University, he completed a Master's in History at Cambridge University. Now based in New York, his work has been published in *Outside Magazine*, *Men's Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Skiing Magazine*, and other major publications. To read more of his work, visit [www.timsohn.com](http://www.timsohn.com).

To read more about Jordan Rapp '98, visit his blog at <http://blog.rappstar.com>

