

Love What You Love Podcast

Episode 22: Adventure Racing with Sonja Wieck

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Hey, I'm Julie Rose. Welcome to *Love What You Love*. I'm an author, creator, and enthusiast, and I've always been intrigued by the things that people are super into. So every week I'll introduce you to another fascinating human who's into really interesting stuff.

Before we get started, if you need some help filling out your ballot, like researching your state initiatives, or background on the folks running for your county supervisor positions, check out Ballotpedia.com. It's a nonpartisan, nonprofit site that provides the information you need to be an informed voter. That's Ballotpedia.com.

Welcome back! Or, Welcome! First of all, I'm so grateful for everyone's support of the podcast. It makes such a huge difference, both in terms of getting the show found by other listeners, but also for my heart, so thank you. Leaving a rating or review on [Apple Podcasts](#) - even if that's not where you listen - is a great way to support the show. You can also spread the love and share about the podcast on social media. Thank you, thank you to everyone who has rated, reviewed, or socialized already. And a massive thank you to Yolanda for always being so supporting on Twitter. Thank you. You're amazing.

Speaking of amazing women, let's get right to this week's guest. Sonja Wieck is an elite athlete and self-described adventure girl who's completed 18 Ironman races. Yeah, I said 18. And in 2019, she and her team were selected to compete in the World's Toughest Race: Eco-Challenge Fiji, hosted by Bear Grylls on Amazon Prime, which you can watch right now.

In this conversation, we talk riding mountain bikes that are way too big for you, swimming with 3,000 of your closest friends, Fijian women with donuts, panic attacks, learning what you're really capable of, and so much more. So find out why Sonja loves adventure racing, and why you might learn to love it too.

Julie: Hello Sonja! Thank you for joining me today.

Sonja: Hi Julie! It's a pleasure to be here. I'm really stoked that you asked me to be on your podcast. I'm happy to be here and happy to have a great conversation today.

Julie: Woohoo! Me too. I'm excited! So, I understand that you have done 18 Ironman races, and you coach Ironman athletes. The thing I want to understand up top is, what is an Ironman race, and why does somebody do it? [laughs]

Sonja: [laughs] That's a great question. An Ironman race, it's a triathlon, so it's swimming, biking, and running all... you know, swim, to bike, to run. And Ironman is a particular distance of race; it's the longest distance that people do swim-bike-run, for the most part. It's a 2.4-mile swim, then a 120-mile bike, and then a 26.2-mile run.

Julie: Wait! So, you swim all this way, then you ride over 100 miles, and then you run a marathon??

Sonja: That's right. That's exactly it, and you don't take any breaks in between, and you try to go as fast as you possibly can. That's my jam. That's what I've been running around doing for a ton of years.

Julie: I guess my first question is, why?? Why do you do this?

Sonja: Well, you know, on the surface level, it looks like a lot of pain and, "Why would anyone go out there and hurt that long?" And of course it started littler for me. In 2005 I had my daughter Annie and she, kind of, created a new lease on life for me. About a year after she was born I was struggling to lose, kind of, the mommy weight, and I had always thought of myself as adventurous, but I really wasn't being adventurous.

So yeah, I had this moment of, like, "Gosh, I really would like to be the girl I think I am, even though I'm now a mom." And I went down to the garage, and I dug out my husband's mountain bike, and I put the seat all the way down because he's 6'4", and I got one of those trailers that I could put Annie in and haul her around, and I started going on these adventures on the bike with Annie.

So, we were biking; we'd bike to the store, bike to the playground, you name it. Then all of a sudden I thought, "Well, if I could lose some of the weight I could run again," so that kind of happened. Then I thought, "Wow, I'm two out of three sports into a triathlon." I didn't know how to swim. I could doggy paddle. I went and took swim lessons and learned how to do, you know, the freestyle stroke, and started doing laps, and figuring that out, and signed up for a triathlon. Just a sprint triathlon, like the shortest distance that you can do.

And I did that, and let me tell you, I just lit up. I got done, and I remember looking at my husband, and I got Annie in my arms, and I said, "I loved every second of that, and I think I could be really good at that." That was it. Once that lightbulb was on, I doubled down and I just went for it. I started training more aggressively, I found a coach, I found a group of people that run track every Tuesday, and just started diving in headfirst, literally. That was 2007, my first race, and 2009 was my first Ironman, so it took me about two years to build up to, kind of, the big-daddy distance.

When I did that first Ironman, I knew that endurance racing and these really long races were my jam. It's what I was good at, it's what I was passionate about, and so from there on, I tried to qualify for the world championships in Kona, and I did that. I had a great debut in Kona, and I thought maybe someday I could win Kona in my age group, so I set a goal to win my age group there. It took 14 Ironmans and five trips to Kona, but in 2014 I was second in my age group at Kona, and second felt like first. [laughs] "That's good enough!"

So I went on and did a few after getting second in Kona, but for me it was more... I got really lit up, and really enthused, and I just threw myself into it. And I found out, "Oh my gosh I'm really good at this."

Julie: Wow. That's a lot. So many questions. When you were young, did you like to... It sounded like you had been a runner before you had Annie. Were you an athlete growing up? And have you always, kind of, had that ability to focus?

Sonja: That's such a great way to phrase that. You know, when I was young my family was really into, like, hiking, camping, being outdoors. We'd take road trips. We'd go to the national parks, so I always had what I would consider, like, a really outdoorsy sense. I did some backpacking... Even in college, with my dad, I did some, like, mountaineering; climbed some bigger peaks via, like, a snow route, and we skied in the winter. So, I always had this, sort of, "I'm an outdoorsy girl. I like to be dirty; I like to push myself." But when it came to focus, I think that was something that I really started to learn and understand after I got pretty knee-deep into Ironman. Because for me, it's a 10-hour race, so to focus on what you need to focus on for ten hours straight, that

was a skill I had to develop as I got into the sport and really understood just how important it was to hone my mind into what I was doing, and not get distracted, or off base, or allow negative thoughts to come in.

Julie: So you developed that over the course of doing multiple races. What does that look like for you?

Sonja: There's a couple strategies that I utilized. You know, I'm big in meditation. I'm big in, like, what I dub as 'functional meditation'. There's lots of ways to meditate, I think. At least, I keep coming across new ways to meditate, but one thing I had noticed was, if I couldn't... my brain is its own muscle, and if it takes me a few minutes to recognize that I'm thinking and I'm in a race, I've already lost a mile or two to unconsciously thinking. So, it was maybe, like, eight or nine Ironmans deep when I realized that parts of my race would go by in an unfocused state.

So I started dabbling in meditation really to think, "If I can train myself to catch myself when I'm thinking..." and in meditation you just bring it back to the breath, right? You think a thought, you might go down the rabbit hole with that thought, but the moment you notice you're having that thought, you come back to your breath. And that was what I needed to, sort of, train myself to do so that I could take it to the race.

And it developed over time. It took a few years of, you know, consistent mediation, three or four times a week, before I started to notice, you know, in the races where I could almost immediately notice when my thought was getting off base of where it needed to be, which was on numbers, execution, eating, drinking, relaxing, those sorts of things. So yeah, I really used mediation to, kind of, bring that into my race to be able to refocus my thoughts and not get distracted for long periods of time.

Julie: How many people are in a race at one time? There's got to be scores of people that you're racing with or against.

Sonja: Yeah, about 3,000.

Julie: Oh my god! [laughs] Okay, more than scores.

Sonja: It gets spread out. I try to find myself to the front. I try to make my way up to the front of the race as quickly as possible.

Julie: And it's all genders racing at one time?

Sonja: Yeah, so Ironman's changed a little bit more recently, but when I was really in the heat of it, it was mass starts. So, it was 3,000 people on the start line, in the water, bobbing, and then they would shoot off a cannon, and 3,000 people would start to swim all at once. It was *gnarly*! [laughs] If you look up any of that footage, you know, seeing 3,000 people pushing each other under, and the first 20 or 30 seconds are every man for himself.

They used to put different colored swim caps on the women. They'd put pink caps on the women and blue caps on the men, and I always wanted a blue cap because I felt like pink caps, we got extra beat up on because men knew that we were women. I wanted to be a little bit more anonymous.

Julie: Right. So, you trained yourself mentally. What goes into training for an Ironman?

Sonja: I get a lot of people who say to me, "Oh my gosh, I could never do that." And I say, "Go to an Ironman. Go watch one." Go watch one because you'll find 150 people there that you can identify with. They're either your age, they look like you, they're your gender,

you name it, there's all types in these races that are going through the motions and getting the job done. So, it really is a sport for anyone who's willing to put in the time, and the effort, and the work. I'll call it work, but really it's a lot of fun.

When you start in the sport, I always urged athletes that it's, like, a gradual build up to the Ironman. You want to take your time and let your body adapt. You don't want to put your body through too much too soon. There's a difference between someone who's, say, training for their first Ironman and someone who's trying to win Kona. So, a first-Ironman athlete might, at some point in time, have to do 17 or 18 hours of training a week, but they're going to hang more in that 14, 15 hours a week of training; swimming, biking, running. So, it might be like three runs a week, three bikes a week, and maybe three or four swims a week.

Yeah, so there will be days that an Ironman athlete has multiple training sessions on one day, and they might... if they're a working person they'll have to do something in the morning, and go to work, and they'll have to come home and maybe go out for a run in the evening, or get on their bike and do a bike ride. And that's just... you have to be ready for that kind of time commitment. And your weekends are pretty gone while you're training, as you're getting the work done.

Then for an elite athlete like myself, it's really, like, a 30-35 hours of training a week for me. So, I'm waking up, I'm going to the pool at 5:15, getting swim in, coming home and getting my daughter ready for school; we're sort of going through the motions there. She's off and running right now by 9 o'clock, and then I'm out for the middle portion of the day, training primarily. Then I'm back home when school's out, and I'm mom through the evening, and then if I've got one more session to get in that evening, a lot of times my husband or my daughter will hop on their bikes, or they'll come do a run with me, or something like that. It's day in, day out when I was training really hard for Ironman like that.

So, it becomes kind of a family lifestyle, but the perk is that they get to go to a lot of really fun places, get a lot of stamps in their passport, and they get to cheer on mom, and they don't have to actually do the race. They get to go to the pool while I'm on the bike and eat ice cream while I'm doing the run.

I love that when people say, "You must get to eat anything you want." [laughs] Um, well, my body is now a machine, right? So, whatever I put in it is what I'm going to get out of it. The key for me... I don't have to eat that much different than I eat when I'm not training. I just have a healthy diet with lots of fruits, and vegetables, and protein, and plenty of ice cream and cookies if I need them in the evening. But what I really focus on is getting that nutrition in while I'm training. So, when I'm on the bike... I'll often be on the bike for 4-6 hours at a time, and I'm getting 200-300 calories down every hour and making sure that I'm staying really hydrated.

So, it's less about having to eat a lot before, during, and after my training sessions. It's more about, "How do I fuel when I'm in my sessions?" And then right after a big session I'll always have a recovery drink, which is somewhere, like, 400-600 calories depending on how big the workout is. And it has some carbohydrates and some protein so it, kind of, gets me replenished. And then I just go back to eating like a normal, healthy human being. If I'm hungry, I eat more. If I'm not hungry, I eat less.

I try not to put a lot of energy into food choices because I feel like you can get a little bit funky as an athlete around food or thinking that food has more to do with

performance than it does. If I'm going to give weight to something that has a lot to do with performance, that's always going to be, like, how happy am I, how satisfied am I, how does my heart feel, how motivated am I? I'm going to put less weight on food and more weight on, kind of, "How am I thriving in life?" I think that makes a bigger difference.

We can definitely place attention in areas that we think are going to have a bigger impact than they actually have because we can control those areas, you know? So, we think, "I can control my food, therefore my food's going to have a big impact," but that might not be true.

Julie: What's the circuit like? Where do these races happen? Who puts them on?

Sonja: For Ironman, the main brand is Ironman. They're a big, global company. They have races all over the world. I've raced in Mexico, Canada, Brazil, Norway, all over the US. The races are... Right now with Covid, everything is off, which is great because athletes need a break. But really, I think the great thing about being an Ironman athlete is that it can take you all over the world. If you want to, you can find races that are happening in China, or I've raced Ironman in New Zealand. I always use it as an excuse, "I'm going to train for this Ironman," and then, "Oh shucks, I guess we're going to have to do ten days in New Zealand after."

Julie: [laughs] You've got to fly all the way there, right? So...

Sonja: Might as well! You can't just go for the Ironman. And for me, honestly, Julie, to tell you the truth, the reason I got into any of this stuff in the first place - which I think you can tell by my very first story - was for adventure. I love being adventurous. It's, to me, less about the swim, the bike, the run, the podiums, the qualifying. It's so much more about, "What adventures can we go on through sport?"

Julie: In that first Ironman, you said you were lighting up. Was it just that sense of, "I just did the coolest adventure; I want more of that."? Is that where that lighting up came from?

Sonja: Yeah! I think so. It's that feeling inside when you just loved what you did, and you saw a million ways you could get better. At least I did. I saw a million ways that I could improve, but that wasn't a daunting thing to me. That was, like, a really exciting thing to me. And I enjoyed the actual process. I enjoyed the swimming, and the biking, and the running, and the pushing myself. The actual experience was fun and invigorating. It wasn't a suffer-fest. There wasn't anything miserable about it. And I think that's, kind of, one of my life... I don't know, pillars, that the outcome is always going to match the journey. So, if you're not having fun along the way, this whole, "Let's delay pleasure for this really awesome outcome," I don't prescribe to that. I think that outcomes in my life have been more... They've more mirrored the journey.

So, if I'm not having fun along the way, I'm probably not going to have a great outcome. I'm not going to have a great race, or I'm not going to be "into" that thing that I was trying to make it to. So, that's always, like, a red flag for me that I need to switch, I need to do something different, or stop doing things the way that I'm doing them, or stop waking up early, or stop staying up late. Whatever it is, if it's starting to feel like it's a push or the motivation isn't there, then I always know, "This is never going to pay off." I've got to find a way to do it with a sense of joy, and purpose, and love, or else I'm not going to have a great day at the end either.

Julie: You know, you enjoy the process, you're having adventure. What does it tell you about yourself and what does it show you about other people?

Sonja: Yeah, I've learned so much through the years. One of the biggest lessons I learned [laughs] the hard way. So, I had mentioned to you that I qualified for Kona the very first time, and I went to Kona, the world championships, the Super Bowl of triathlon. And the first year I got 15th in my age group, which I thought was amazing. And I remember my coach at the time telling me, "I think you could win your age group at Kona." And I thought, "Wow! I was, like, a mom who was riding her husband's mountain bike three years ago, and now this guy's telling me I could be a world champion." That really was juicy to me in my psyche.

And I doubled down on the goal. For five years I pushed really hard to try to win. And in 2014 when I got second... Little did I know how hard of a goal it was to set. "Oh, I'm just going to be the best in the world in a sport that's really popular of all the 35-39-year-old women in the world, with who-knows-what kind of lifestyle, access to funds, access to coaching. No, I'm going to be better than all of them" What an egotistical ask. When I got second I remember thinking, "Okay, that felt like winning." That really did feel like winning. I mean, I tried so hard, so many years. And the best thing that ever happened to me, what I learned about people was the next day after.

So, I went to the award ceremony... When you get on the podium at Kona, you get to go to this big fancy award ceremony with, like, hula dancers; it's a high-production thing. You get up on the podium and they hand you this wooden bowl. It's called an Umeke bowl. It's this gorgeous, Hawaiian, wooden bowl. I woke up the next morning and I remember, we were in an Airbnb, and I looked over on my nightstand, and the wooden bowl was right there. And the first thought I had on my mind was, "Oh my gosh, that bowl is empty, and that's about how I feel. I am the same girl the day after getting everything I ever wanted. I'm still missing something."

And I think that's what... I got very lucky in my life that I actually made it to the top, because then I got to have the day after making it to the top, whereas so many people, they never get that 'day after making the top'. They just keep setting the next thing, thinking the next thing is going to get them whatever they want to feel inside. And it's not until you actually get everything you ever wanted and you have to wake up the next day and say, "Oh no. I'm still the same person," that you really start to think, "What am I after here? What is life about? What am I meant to learn? Who am I meant to serve? What's my purpose? What have I been chasing?"

I remember thinking to myself, "I don't think that my life is about beating people." Like, I'm pretty sure if I came here with a purpose, it wasn't to beat people. It's more than that. There's something else here, but I didn't quite know what the something else was, and I didn't know why I was so compelled to dedicate my entire life to getting on the top of this one podium in this one race in the world. But I had to unpack all that from that point on, and that was a good thing.

Julie: You've been pretty open on your website about, you know, mental health struggles that we all have, so was that, like, the genesis of that period of struggle?

Sonja: I would say that was the seed of, "Hmm... running around and getting on podiums every month probably isn't going to satisfy me long term." But after that, what I really took from that was, "I think you need to serve." It's got to be about service, right? It's

not about ego; it's about service. So, built a coaching company so I could share everything I had learned with other people and teach others to chase podiums.

Wait a second! That business really turned into a podium of itself. How many athletes, how many coaches? What's our revenue? How fast are we growing? So, that too didn't get it. It was another, like, "A for effort, Sonja," but after about two-and-a-half years of that coaching business and diving into entrepreneurship, I never really got to the bottom of understanding why I was doing these things. And because of that, other people's feedback was very hard on me. Because I didn't have that internal compass, I was constantly looking for other people's approval, other people's satisfaction, and when you run a business with 150 athletes and 7 assistant coaches, you get a lot of feedback.

And eventually that feedback to me to a day in my business where I had a series of panic attacks all day long. I had one at the end of the day... It was a really bad day in the business, and I was really doing damage control. I had this bad panic attack in an autobody parking lot that... I passed out, and my husband had to call 911, and I went to the ER. That was really the start.

That was really the wakeup moment when I, kind of, came out of that. And I, of course got a little bit of calm-down drugs to let me sleep for a while. When I came out of that, I remember just feeling like a teapot that had been dropped on the ground and was in a million pieces, and I was standing there with a million pieces of myself saying, "I don't know even know how to fit two pieces back together, much less show up like a teapot tomorrow."

So that ultimately... my husband closed my coaching business right after that, and I had a four-month period of, kind of, depression, anxiety, some suicidal ideation, and then also a lot of healing. I kind of was in mental health crisis, and we had to back me out of mental health crisis, and then get more established in those foundational mental health strategies to stay stable. But it was a journey. It was a journey from that point on. So, coming out of that has been... now I'm in, sort of, the best time of my life where I'm able to really understand why I'm here, and really understand what I'm about, and who I'm here to serve, and how to do it in a healthy way.

Julie: So how are you serving in a healthy way?

Sonja: Oh my gosh. Well... Okay, so after coming out of that period, I saw this application for this race called the World's Toughest Race: Eco-Challenge Fiji, and the application had a little video, and it was this race called the Eco-Challenge back in the late '90s, early 2000s that was on the Discovery Channel. It was a race like nothing I had ever done. It involved lots of sports, but you also had to navigate by map and compass for this. And it was teams of four, called adventure racing. And I saw that they were bringing it back, Mark Burnett was producing the show, and Bear Grylls was hosting the show, and I thought, "I remember this show!"

I remembered these ladies being so adventurous. They were whitewater rafting, and mountain biking, and jungle trekking, and all with a map and compass. Even though I didn't have any experience in most of all of that, I went back to that core belief inside of me that I was adventurous, and I was outdoorsy, and I loved challenge. So here I am now, still adventurous, still outdoorsy, love challenge, but I'm also an 18-time Ironman athlete who knows a lot about being an endurance athlete. So, I went ahead and applied for this race, and it lit me up! The minute I saw the application video, a lightbulb

went off in my head. I knew I had to do it. So yeah, I put together a team, and we applied, and we got accepted.

Julie: Now you're on a show on Amazon Prime!

Sonja: Right. I'm on, like, a full-on... So, I never would've been on that show if I hadn't had my darker period. I'd still be Ironman racing if I hadn't gone through some of that. So, it all kind of led to what it needed to lead to, and now my platform is a lot bigger, and I can talk openly and honestly about foundations of mental health, and what it feels like to be in crisis from the athlete population, which is a population that has a lot of mental health struggles and a lot of stigma. I feel uniquely positioned at this point to, kind of, serve, or at least be a light, or at least share my journey in a way I never would have been able to before.

Julie: And you never know who needs to hear your story. So, having that platform is incredible. So, let's talk a little bit about World's Toughest Race. 400 miles in 11 days with no GPS; 700 production people; 66 teams of four; and ten episodes hosted by Bear Grylls. It's too broad of a question to say, "What was that like," but what was the best experience? What was the most challenging experience? And what did you learn about yourself?

Sonja: Gosh, it was... It felt like a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I think we all knew we were in for something big because Bear Grylls was involved, and Mark Burnett was involved. Those are very big names in the TV industry. I don't think any of us really realized just what a massive production we were about to be involved in. And when we did realize that - pretty quickly after arriving in Fiji - everyone wanted to do right by the production crew because they were pulling out all the stops. I mean, every 't' was crossed and 'i' was dotted.

We were really well taken care of in terms of... the course was amazing, and we were really allowed to race totally, 100% unencumbered as fast as we possibly could go. So, there was never a time when a cameraman would say, like, "Can you stop and talk to me?" or anything like that. They ran along with us and supported us along the way. The experience was very positive.

I would say the best, like, overarching part of the experience was the Fijian people. They are... I don't know if you've ever been to Fiji, but they have this, like, *bula* attitude: *Bula, bula, bula!* And every single Fijian who greets who, or sees you, in Fiji - especially when you're racing across the backcountry - they greet you, "*Bula, bula, bula!*" The kids run with you, and they invite you into their homes, and they have food if you need food, or they will let you sleep on their floor. Anything that's needed, it's an open-door policy with every single community we went through.

There were times when we would get done and we'd be covered head to toe in mud because we'd dragged our mountain bikes miles through something that wasn't really a trail but should've been; some crazy thing that the race had made us do. We'd pop out in the village, and there was one village where, I mean, they literally had a party. It was like, music, somebody put a baby in my arms. A woman put a donut in my mouth. Someone washed my bike. Every step of the way... I don't think a lot of us would've gotten through the race without the positivity, and light, and support, and love that came from the Fijian people. We don't have anything like it in America.

But there were low moments. I was our team's navigator. I put together a team of all Ironman athletes, and so... We don't ever have to use map and compass in Ironman,

and I was the only one who had any past experience using map and compass. Most teams have two navigators that trade off because the job is so tough. So, we only had me, and that was a big ask for a rather new navigator to keep us found and find all the checkpoints along the way. Sometimes mountain biking, sometimes I was one the boat... I was our steersman as well, so I'd be steering with my right hand, and I'd have the compass in my left hand and the map on my lap, and it was a lot of things, kind of, simultaneously, to be responsible for. Sometimes it got to be too much for this little girl.

It was overwhelming. I had a situation where we were on a lake, it was night, we couldn't really see the shore, it was very foggy, misty, kind of rainy. It got really cold. You wouldn't think it's cold in Fiji, but it's very cold in the highlands. So I put on all my extra clothing that I usually keep in, like, a dry bag in case I need to stay alive with it, you know? And I fell off my paddleboard at, like... I think it was probably like 12:15am. I fell off, I got everything soaked, and I got us hopelessly lost. Like, really, really lost. So lost that at one point we just had to call it quits and say, "Let's just crawl onto shore and sleep until it's light so that I can get back to where I can see some things around me and start to reorient myself."

But I had no dry clothes, so I spent about four hours that night... I had, in the bottom of my pack, one dry sports bra. So I, like, stripped naked, got in my sports bra, wrapped myself in an emergency blanket, wrapped myself in a tarp, and I laid, like, on the shore for four hours and shivered uncontrollably just waiting for the light to come so that I could get us found again. Anxiety, stress, fear, cold, nearly hypothermic. Like, all the things. Those were some of the lowest points, but you know, there's no option to quit. I'm not going to call it quits, I just need to get through it, and get found, and get dry, and get warm.

I said in my head a million times that night, "There will come a time in your life when you will be hot. Probably not more than 48 hours from now. Sometime in the next 48, you're probably going to be hot, and sweaty, and pissed off about that, so let's just embrace that we're really cold, and really naked, and it's going to change at some point."

Julie: When it's that extreme, meditating is probably out the window, but it's like having this stream of self-talk that's... It's like a coach keeping you going.

Sonja: That's a really great topic that you bring up, because I had an experience where I learned something really profound about that. The second-to-last day of the race, we've got a lot of mountain biking left to go, we're great mountain bikers, I kind of have it in the bag. We made it through all the camps, we're on the last big chunk of the race. We get out and going, we've probably got 48 hours left of racing, and I... right away, I get really hot. It's, like, 10am, we're in a section of Fiji that's pretty muggy, and we have to go straight up a hill on our mountain bikes. The hills in Fiji are super steep.

We go straight up a hill; I'm walking my bike. It's that steep, I don't even have enough gears to ride it. I end up having a panic attack. And this is the first one I've had in the race, and I haven't had a panic attack for quite a while so I'm like, "You're back. Great." Hyperventilating, sitting on the ground, getting control of myself. One of my teammates is like, "Whaaat do we do if that happens again?" It's like, "We stop. We wait. We let me get control of it. There's not a lot I can do about it." So, 20 minutes later

I have another panic attack because it's still hot, it's still hard, I'm not warmed up, the hills are still really steep, so I have another one.

I'm sitting there having it, dealing with it, the boys come over, they ask if they can pray for me. They pray for me a bit. They're trying to do anything to get me up and going again. And after the prayer, one of my teammates grabs my shoulders and he says, "I can push your bike. I can hold your pack. But I can't change the thoughts in your head. *You* have to do that." It was the first time somebody actually called me out on the thoughts I was thinking. Because we think we can hide them, you know? But when you're doing a race like this, he knew what I was thinking in my head because he saw what was coming out of my body.

And there's always a million excuses you can have, right? It was hot. I wasn't warmed up. I did just race for eight days straight on minimal sleep. I'm not very well fed. There's all these excuses in the book. But he knew that none of those actually mattered if I was saying the right thing to myself in my head. What I had been saying to myself was, "I don't think I can do this." I got really hot, I just was repeating 'I don't think I can do this, it's really hot out, I don't think I can do this'. And once he called me out, I said to myself, "Oh my gosh, I've been called out. I've got to find a different thing to think." And the only thing I could come up with that I actually believed was, "My core body temp is fine." Like, not *good* because I didn't believe that; I didn't believe that my core body temperature was good, but I could say that "right now, it's fine."

So I started saying that "My core body temp is fine. My core body temp is fine." And lo and behold, 20 minutes later, I'm riding with our number one fastest guy rider. I thought to myself, "What hasn't changed? The hills haven't changed. I'm not really any more warmed up. I've still been racing for eight days. I'm still hungry and tired. It's still hot out." All of the excuses that I had before were all still true, but suddenly my performance was a complete 180 of what my performance was prior, and the only thing that had changed there was that I went from thinking, "I don't think I can do this," to, "My core body temp is fine."

Julie: I think it's fascinating because, you know, you would think that people would tell you that you've got think, "I can do this!"

Sonja: Right.

Julie: Something as simple as challenging the thought you were having, and it doesn't have to be a positive thought; it can be neutral. But that worked.

Sonja: And I think that's actually, like, a mega little hack. People think they have to say 'I can do this', but if you don't believe it, then you're not actually saying it because your brain is believing something different, which means your brain is saying something different. So yeah, it's really about making, like, a micro-move away from 'I can't' to, "Can I find another, totally true thought that might give me a different outcome?" Then you try it on. Just think it for a while and see what happens to your life, your body, your performance, your writing, your songwriting, whatever you're into. Don't make it something major, just give it a baby step and test the output, and if you don't like the output, see if you can make another baby step.

Julie: So, it sounds like it was an incredible experience. Would you do it again?

Sonja: Oh hands down, yes! Absolutely. I think all of us who did it, we were so enamored with the whole experience. A, we all got to race this amazing race... It's like birthing a child.

A few months later you're like, "It wasn't that bad. The pain wasn't that bad." You get well rested again; you remember all the cool stuff you got to do. The race is going next year to Patagonia, so everyone wants to race in Patagonia, and everyone's putting together new teams, some have the same old teams. Yeah, so I've applied with a new team. We'll see how that goes. But we just don't know. They got 10x the number of applications that they got the first time around, so they've got a really tough job ahead of them to decide what teams they're going to allow to do the race.

Julie: How do you attack it? Besides your mental attitude, is it just, like, "Okay, this one-hour block at a time"? How do you approach it?

Sonja: You know, the way these races work is that you don't get your maps until ten minutes before the start of the race. So to some extent it's just about controlling the controllables. They give you a lot of information before the race, so you're working on controlling the information they've given you. They've told you all the sports that you'll be doing, all the mandatory gear you need to have, you know how many days you're racing. There's a lot of to-dos, of just controlling the controllables; food, gear, etc. And then once the race actually starts, luckily, it is checkpoint to checkpoint. So, it's all about getting from the start of the race to checkpoint one, and how can we do that to the best of our ability, and how can we take care of ourselves and take care of our teammates along the way, and not get too lost?

With Ironman it was an interesting dynamic because you're really trying to get the best race out of yourself. You're trying to make sure nothing goes wrong on race day so that you can get maximal, sort of, effort out of your body. But in adventure racing and World's Toughest Race: Eco-Challenge, everything goes wrong. You're racing for ten days, all sorts of stuff's going to go wrong. People are going to get really tired. People are going to get really hungry. You're going to go the wrong way. You're going to tip your boat over. You're going to lose things. All that's going to happen, so it's less about trying to control all of these things and it's more about going with the flow of so much. Like, just waiting... enjoying when things aren't going wrong and problem solving when things are going wrong.

So, it's a lot more about life and how we, kind of, tackle life. We all know things are going to go wrong from week to week as we progress through our own lives, so I felt like it was a lot more healthy of an experience and a sport because life is about challenges and overcoming them, and so is adventure racing. Life is about finding your way and navigating your way through the checkpoints of your own life, and so is adventure racing. So, to me it just feels a lot more natural and... like, you get a whole year's worth of experiences condensed into ten days. But yeah, you do it like you do life. One day at a time, one week at a time, take care of the people that you love, take care of the people around you, take care of yourself, and that's all you really can do.

Julie: So for folks who feel like this sounds really interesting, that it might be something that would light them up, what advice would you give people who would want to get started in this?

Sonja: Find other people who are one step ahead of you. That's all you need. You don't need anything fancy. No matter what lights you up, or what you're interested in, start finding some people who've just got a bit more experience, and they're going to help you take those next steps, and that's going to open more doors for you. Don't worry about what the vision has to look like, or what the journey has to look like. It's really: go find

someone who's just a hair ahead of you and start hanging out. Go for a run, go for a ride. Ask if you can meet for coffee. Just take a step in that direction and then just follow the doors. The doors will open, and all you have to do is walk through them at that point. The ones you know that you need to walk through is because you get excited. It's that easy.

Julie: Sonja, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me, and sharing your experiences, and your wisdom. I'm really grateful. Thank you.

Sonja: Thank you, Julie. It's been really nice to have this conversation today, and I'm really thankful that you asked me to be on your podcast. It's an honor.

I feel so energized by this conversation! If you want to hear more about Sonja's adventures and those of her fellow Eco-Challenge racers, check out her *Tales of Toughness* podcast. You can find the podcast and more about Sonja at GoSonja.com, and @GoSonja on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/GoSonja) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/GoSonja). I'll include links to her socials in the show notes, along with links to her favorite nonprofits.

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Zeke Rodrigues Thomas at Mindjam Media provided heroic editing assistance. You can find Zeke at MindjamMedia.com. Also, just a reminder that all of the transcripts for *Love What You Love* are available for everyone on the website. Thanks to Emily White, as always, for the fantastic transcripts. The music for *Love What You Love* is called "Inspiring Hope" by Pink-Sounds. A link to that artist is included in the show notes.

Go out there and love the hell out of whatever it is that you love. You need it, and we need it. Thanks for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

Links:

Find Sonja on [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/GoSonja), [Twitter](https://twitter.com/GoSonja), [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/GoSonja), and GoSonja.com

Sonja's favorite nonprofits:

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](http://www.afsp.org)

[National Alliance on Mental Illness](http://www.namh.gov)

My favorite nonprofits:

Vote.org

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