

A FREE GUIDE FROM LARA HAMILTON

WHEN NO ONE HAS DONE IT BEFORE YOU.

How I navigated sport, illness, and life
with no roadmap, and what it taught me.

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BY LARA HAMILTON

2026 Olympian - Trail Runner - Skimo Racer - Ankylosing Spondylitis

Photo: @justingalant

I went to the Olympics. I forgot to run my business.

I was so deep in training, racing, and doing interviews that I never got around to sending this guide to the people who asked for it. The form on my website was collecting emails and delivering nothing. I'm sorry about that.

But here's what I did do: I went to the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan and competed in skimo's Olympic debut, finishing 18th in the sprint and 12th in the mixed relay. I raced with ankylosing spondylitis, on a shoestring budget, from a base in the French Pyrenees, with no specialist skimo coach until four months before the Games.

This guide is built from things I've written honestly over the past few years, about running, about chronic illness, about doing things when you have no map and no one around you who has done it before. It's not a training plan. It's not a list of tips. It's just what I've learned, in my own words.

If something in here resonates, I'd genuinely love to hear from you.

- *Lara*

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Why I Run, and Why It Saved Me

Running is not just something I do. It is a lifeline.



Photo: @wanderstudios

It might sound dramatic to say that running changed my life. But I only truly figured out just how important this sport is to me at the beginning of 2021, and by then, the sport had already given me so much. At 17, in my final months of high school, I accidentally won the Sydney Harbour 5km on a whim, coming back from a week of high altitude Nordic ski training. Running just clicked with me better than anything else had.

By 2018, I'd made the all-time Australian fastest 5k track and 10k road lists, finished 3rd at Oceania XC, and was training hard toward what I hoped would be a scholarship and an Olympic dream. I won the U20 Australian XC title in 2020. None of that felt like the turning point though. The turning point was quieter.

"Suddenly I was known as a runner. People seemed to change the way they treated me. Almost with more respect. It got me through."

In 2017, a very close family member was diagnosed with cancer for the second time. I was 18-19 and not the most emotionally mature. So I went into autopilot with my training. I won the U20 Australian XC Championships fuelled by very strong emotions and a sense of helplessness. My sick family member came especially to watch. To this day, that is one of the most important and joyful days of my entire life.

Running saved me during that time. And it would save me again, more than once.

KEY TAKEAWAYS	TRY THIS
<p>Relying on sport to get through hard times is not a character flaw. It got me through some of the hardest moments of my life.</p>	<p><i>Think of one time sport carried you through something. What was actually going on underneath it?</i></p>
<p>The reason behind a performance matters as much as the result. My best race that year was run for someone I loved.</p>	<p><i>Ask yourself honestly: why am I doing this right now? If the answer feels hollow, that is worth sitting with.</i></p>
<p>Having something outside sport that genuinely fills you up is not a distraction. It is what keeps you whole.</p>	<p><i>Name one thing outside sport that you care about. When did you last make real time for it?</i></p>

Ankylosing Spondylitis Had a Lot to Teach Me

They call AS the 'young person's arthritis'. When I heard that, I hated it.

I associated it with being limited, and I wanted to be unlimited. I had just won the U20 Australian XC title, made the all-time fastest Australian lists on track and road, competed internationally for Australia, and earned a D1 NCAA scholarship to Boise State. I had no intention of slowing down.

AS affects 1-2% of Australians and is most commonly diagnosed between 15-40, yet 80% of patients experience symptoms before age 30. On average it takes more than 3 years from first symptoms to diagnosis. For me it took 4. In that time I went from being a competitive NCAA XC runner to barely knowing what my body was capable of on any given day.

"The constant pain felt like a constant hum that at times made me feel like I should just give up. Then it would disappear for a couple of days and I'd really get moving again. The unpredictability made me feel unstable."



Photo: @wanderstudios

In September 2022, I began fortnightly Biologic injections. They changed things. Fewer days in pain, fewer flare-ups, better mental health, better performance. I didn't trust that they would work. But they did.

At the 2023 Golden Trail World Series final, the night before the race, I experienced pains that led me to fly immediately back to Australia for an MRI. I was done for the season. That's AS. Unpredictable. Non-linear. Completely indifferent to your race calendar.

KEY TAKEAWAYS	TRY THIS
Getting a diagnosis after years of not knowing what is wrong is both a relief and a grief. Both are completely valid.	<i>If a doctor has dismissed you, book with a different one. You know your body better than anyone.</i>
If something in your body feels off and no one can explain it, keep pushing. Four years without answers is a long time.	<i>Start a simple log of good days and bad days. Even just one word. Patterns become visible over time.</i>
Treatment that works can take time to find and time to trust. I didn't believe the injections would help until they did.	<i>Tell one person the full version of what you're dealing with, not the edited one you give everyone else.</i>

Finding Stability in Instability

AS didn't allow me to plan and chip away at things. I had to learn to find stability in the instability.



Photo: @wanderstudios

It was a microcosm for living life in general. I love planning. I love structure. I love knowing what's coming. AS took all of that away from me.

What it gave me in return was something more durable: the ability to keep going without certainty. To function when I didn't know what the next week would feel like, let alone the next season.

"Life will continue to be like a moody ocean. Some days will be calm and clear. Other days will be a storm. If you can ride out the occasional storm and harness the restorative energy in the calm, you've found stability in instability."

Things tend to work out in some way or another, even when it's hard to see that from inside the weeds. Uncertainty, fear, anxiety - they are all easily magnified by the world around us. If we can ride out the storms, ask for help, and simply do what we can do in that moment, it usually works out. Chop wood, carry water.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

TRY THIS

Not knowing what comes next is genuinely hard. You do not have to pretend otherwise.	<i>Identify your one non-negotiable daily anchor, something small and grounding, and protect it.</i>
The storm always eventually passes. You already have evidence of this in your own life.	<i>When you feel overwhelmed, write down three things you can actually control right now. Just three.</i>
Doing small, consistent things is how you stay anchored when everything else is shifting.	<i>Write down one time you got through something you didn't think you would. Keep it somewhere you can see it.</i>

The Choice Point

My mentor calls it 'The Choice Point.' It is the thing that got me through. And even mentors have mentors.

It means to act in a manner that is either consistent or inconsistent with your values. If we let ourselves think in a consistently negative way on autopilot, we don't make any changes. I try to allow myself to feel the feelings for a minute, and then choose to act in a way that is beneficial to me.

"How can we expect a positive life if our thoughts are consistently negative, seeking problems or scenarios that haven't even happened yet? We simply can't see the positive if internally we are not. It is about recognising the loop when it starts, and choosing to interrupt it."



Early 2021 was the lowest point. COVID had upended everything. I had spent 2019-2021 in the US studying, training, and building a life, only to be stuck there when Australia closed its borders. I finished my six years of opera training, an undergraduate degree and a Masters, and performed my final recital, 15 songs across four languages, to an empty hall wearing a mask, with two university judges as my only audience. Thanks, COVID. And then I came home.

Landing in Australia after two years away, I went straight into 14 days of hotel quarantine. I hadn't been home in years. My body was falling apart and I still had no answers. I didn't know I had AS until November 2021. Stuck in a hotel room, unable to train, unable to see family, not knowing what life looked like on the other side, I felt completely estranged from the person I had been.

There was also a serious breach of trust, and a minor car accident, and teammates and a team life that had all fallen apart. I turned to books, to guitar, to long walks collecting rocks and crystals. Looking back: know what you enjoy outside of sport, and keep fostering those things alongside it. They are not distractions. They are the things that hold you when everything else gives way.

Sometimes we won't be able to choose the positive response and we'll fall back into old habits. That is okay. Practice grace for yourself in these moments. It takes consistent work, as does every skill.

KEY TAKEAWAYS	TRY THIS
You always have a choice in how you respond, even in the worst moments. That is not toxic positivity, it is the only real leverage you have.	<i>Next time you feel reactive or spiralling, pause for 60 seconds before doing anything. Just 60.</i>
Falling back into old patterns is normal. What matters is that you notice, reset, and keep going.	<i>Write down three values that actually matter to you. Then check your last week against them honestly.</i>
The things you do outside sport, music, books, collecting rocks, whatever it is, are what carry you when sport can't.	<i>Pick one non-sport thing to properly nurture this week. Not scroll. Actually do it.</i>

Self-Discovery in Uncertainty

I have always believed in myself. But I wouldn't have thought, years ago, that I'd get a chance to go to the Olympics for ski mountaineering.



Photo: @andy_wacker_photography

Life will surprise you like that. You might get your dream, or at least an opportunity to achieve it, but it's not going to look the way you imagined. Before Nordic skiing I'd dreamt of becoming a professional surfer. That shifted to an Olympic dream in Nordic, then to track and cross country, then to trail running, then to skimo, which debuted at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan.

A specialised skimo coach wasn't in the picture until October 2025. My results improved drastically from there. I finished 18th in the sprint and 12th in the mixed relay alongside Phil Bellingham at Milano Cortina 2026. I went to the Olympics. The Games were funded, and then nothing. The rest of the season was covered by my online work, donations, and DJ gigs. Constantly feeling like I'm living off the smell of an oily rag, a fitting idiom that reminds me of home from my French base in the Pyrenees.

"I don't want to be old one day and realise I didn't give it a shot. I don't want to think I didn't try when I've had all these opportunities and means to make dreams come true."

I don't linger too long on the unknowns. I just keep going as long as I can and try not to predict the future, because honestly, none of us know what's coming. And here is the thing nobody talks about enough: achieving the goal is not the life-changer. The life-changer is the confidence you grow on the way there, the relationships you form, the skills you build, and the total experience of having tried. The destination matters far less than what you become in the process.

KEY TAKEAWAYS	TRY THIS
The dream rarely arrives the way you imagined. That doesn't make it less the dream.	<i>Write down the thing you keep putting off because the timing isn't right. Is it ever going to be right?</i>
Achieving the goal is not what changes you. The confidence, the relationships, the skills you build on the way there, that is what changes you.	<i>Name one person who has done something close to what you want to do. Study how they actually got there.</i>
You do not need everything in place before you start. The resources often appear when you are already moving.	<i>Give yourself permission to try something you are not yet good at. Seriously, write it down and pick a date.</i>

What I Know Now

The thing that helps the most is not getting into my stress patterns.



Everyone has a pattern their body goes into when stressed or overwhelmed. I've worked hard on mine, through meditation, journaling, and doing things that genuinely make me passionate and happy.

"I race the best not when I'm the fittest, but when I'm the most joyful. Everyone has a deep energy source within them they can draw on when they feel at peace. I'm trying to learn how to access that, especially when I feel down."

My number one priority now is community, friends, and connection, and letting sport come from that place rather than the other way around. That shift has helped not just my performance, but who I am as a person.

Don't get sucked into comparison. Everything on social media is the carefully selected best parts of someone's life. Mine included. Whatever you're navigating, illness, relocation, self-doubt, doing something no one around you has done, the path forward is almost always the same. Do what you can do. Ask for help. Find your people. Ride out the storm. Then go again.

You'll get better at getting yourself out of the weeds. You'll be like a tennis ball: you can bounce back.

KEY TAKEAWAYS	TRY THIS
Joy is not a bonus on top of performance. It is actual fuel. When I am joyful, I race better.	<i>Name your stress pattern. What does your body actually do when you start to spiral? Write it down and name it.</i>
Isolation makes everything harder. Community is not optional.	<i>Reach out to one person in your corner this week, not to ask for anything, just to connect.</i>
Comparison has no exit. The only way out is to stop looking at what everyone else is doing and get back to your own thing.	<i>Spend 10 minutes doing something completely unrelated to performance. Notice honestly how it feels.</i>

If any of this resonated, let's talk.

This guide is a small slice of what I've learned the hard way. The bigger conversation happens on a call.

I work with athletes, movers, and people navigating hard things. Training with a chronic illness, moving abroad, doing something no one around them has done before, figuring out what comes next. If that sounds like you, the first call is always free. Thirty minutes, no pitch, no pressure.

Book your free 30-min call

lara-hamilton.com/work-with-me

Monthly mentoring from A\$350 - Single strategy sessions A\$197

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