

As I listened to Ross share his journey, several themes emerged that deserve deeper reflection. These aren't just interesting ideas—they're principles that could fundamentally shift how you approach the second half of your life. Let me walk you through eight key insights from our conversation, and then I'll offer one practical experiment you might consider. Here are 6 short reflections and one experiment.

1. The Wisdom of Walking Away: Self-Awareness Trumps External Pressure

Ross's decision to retire from competitive swimming at age 10 reveals something profound about self-knowledge. He recognised the difference between what others wanted for him and what he wanted for himself. That five o'clock wake-up call, the cold Tasmanian mornings, the physical demands of competing against older, stronger kids—he didn't experience this as character-building. He experienced it as soul-crushing.

What strikes me is that this wasn't burnout in the conventional sense. Ross made a clear-eyed assessment: 'I don't want to do this anymore.' And critically, he had a father who heard him. They agreed he'd step back but maintain enough engagement to swim for his high school. This is a masterclass in finding the middle path—not complete abandonment, but a sustainable relationship with something you once loved.

2. Building Confidence Through Incremental Challenge

When Ross decided to attempt a solo English Channel crossing, he didn't just dive in. He methodically built his confidence through graduated challenges. First, the relay gave him a 'visualisation' and 'rehearsal' of what was involved. Then he waited six years until his kids finished high school—acknowledging that ambitious personal goals often need to fit around life's other responsibilities.

The progression was deliberate: 10-kilometre swims, then Rottneest Island at 20 kilometres (about half the English Channel distance), gradually building both physical capacity and psychological readiness. Ross explained it beautifully:

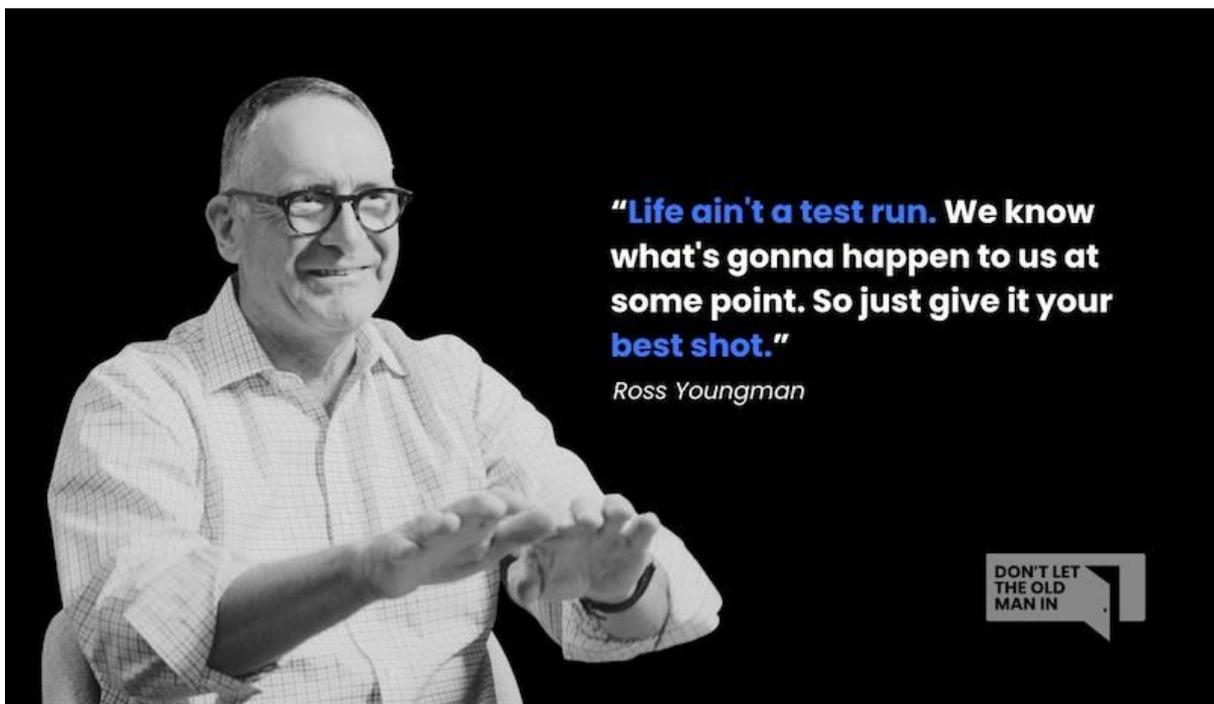
'You start small and you build confidence.' This incremental approach applies far beyond swimming. Whether you're contemplating a career change, starting a business, or taking on any significant challenge in midlife, the principle remains: start small, build competence, stack successes.

3. Social Connection as the Primary Driver

This insight connects directly to Gordon Spence's appearance on the show a few months back, where he emphasised that social connection is the most important factor in sustaining exercise habits in midlife. Ross embodies this completely. Listen to how he talks about his swimming squad: 'The swimming was good, but the camaraderie, the social aspect—that was really fun.'

He lights up when describing the pre-swim coffee chats, the post-training conversations, the international network of marathon swimmers who gather wherever he travels. Ross explicitly says he watches the clock during training, knowing that at 7:30 am they'll 'all gonna sit around and have another yak.' The swimming itself is almost secondary to the community it provides access to.

This aligns perfectly with longevity research showing that social connection is one of the strongest predictors of healthy ageing. Ross has found a vehicle—marathon swimming—that delivers both physical challenge and deep social engagement. The question for each of us: what vehicle serves both purposes in our own lives?



4. The Psychology of Endurance: Tricks for Staying in the Water

Swimming for 12-15 hours in open water isn't primarily a physical challenge—it's a psychological one. Ross emphasised that marathon swimming requires 'all sorts of psychological tricks to keep you in the water.' The stakes are absolute: touch the support boat even once and your swim is over. Disqualified. Everything you've trained for, nullified by a single moment of weakness.

Ross compares swimming to 'a long power walk'—not sprinting, just consistently moving from point A to point B. This reframing is crucial. He's not trying to be fast; he's trying to finish. At 64, his goal is simply to complete the distance. This acceptance of his own pace, his own level, removes the burden of competition with younger swimmers. It's pure mastery orientation: the challenge is internal, measured against his own standards, not external benchmarks.

5. Age as a Number, Not a Limitation

Ross referenced Ellen Langer's famous 'counterclockwise experiment,' where older adults were immersed in an environment designed to make them feel younger—and they actually showed physical improvements as a result. Ross's swimming squad embodies this principle naturally. When you're in the pool, whether you're 25 or 60, you're simply sorted by speed. Age becomes irrelevant.

'The young people don't want to hear about your aches and pains,' Ross observed. 'They've got zero interest.' Instead, they want career advice, help with their own swims, mentorship. This creates a 'symbiotic relationship' where older swimmers can't indulge in age-related complaints, and younger swimmers benefit from wisdom and experience.

Ross also mentioned research showing that elite athletic performance only begins to taper off around age 70. At 64, he reports 'I haven't seen anything that's affecting my ability to do this.' His physical capacity remains strong not despite his age, but because he's refused to accept age as a limiting factor in his identity.



6. The One Shot Philosophy: Optimism as a Deliberate Practice

Perhaps the most powerful theme running through Ross's story is his commitment to optimism—not as naive positivity, but as a conscious decision about where to direct limited mental energy. His father was 'glass three-quarters full, if not overflowing,' and Ross has inherited or chosen this orientation.

'I don't have a lot of tolerance for people with negativity,' Ross admitted. 'I just think we've got one shot, you know, let's make the most of it.' This isn't about denying reality or avoiding difficult emotions. It's about choosing what deserves your attention. As Ross approaches 65, he's clear: 'I try and manage my own thought processes to eliminate negative things and just focus on positive things.'

His final words of wisdom encapsulate this philosophy: 'Life ain't a test run. We are here. We know the actuarial tables don't lie. We know what's gonna happen to us at some point. So just give it your best shot.' This isn't morbid—it's liberating. The finite nature of life becomes permission to act, not an excuse for paralysis.

THE EXPERIMENT: Your Gut Feeling Audit

Ross's story about seeing the Monash Foundation advertisement—twice, five years apart—highlights the importance of paying attention to that 'gut feeling of excitement.' So here's your experiment for the next two weeks:

Keep a simple daily log with just two questions:

What gave me that 'gut feeling of excitement' today? (Could be reading an article, having a conversation, working on a project, learning something new)

What drained my energy or made me feel like I was 'just making up the numbers'?

Don't analyse it yet. Just notice and record. After two weeks, look for patterns. What consistently shows up in the excitement column? What repeatedly appears in the energy-drain column?



Ross teaches us that the role he's in now—the one that brings together everything he's done—didn't appear immediately. He had to pay attention to that initial spark five years earlier, remember it, and recognise it when the timing finally aligned. Your gut feeling audit might reveal similar patterns: opportunities you're not yet ready for, interests you've dismissed too quickly, or energy drains that deserve more serious attention.

The goal isn't to make immediate, dramatic changes. It's simply to develop what Ross has cultivated over six decades: a clear internal compass that helps you distinguish between what others want for you and what you actually want for yourself.

Ross Youngman's story reminds us that the second half of life isn't about managing decline—it's about deliberate expansion. Whether you're swimming the English Channel or simply showing up for your morning coffee with friends, the question remains the same: Are you giving it your best shot?

Until next time, don't let the old man in.

— Pod O'Sullivan



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