

EIGHT POINT NINE NINE

BY JAMES FRITZ

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FX - The sound of a human heartbeat. A breath. In and out.

DARREN

This whole world, we're obsessed with going faster, getting better, climbing higher. More and more, you know.

FX - sound of a gun going off, a crowd cheering,

INTRODUCTION

Why do we love record-breakers?

FX - Archive Clips - Roger Bannister running the four minute mile, Bob Beaumont breaking the long jump record,

JANELLE

He'd say to me all the time, imagine being the best mum, I wanna be the best.

FX - Eliud Kipchoge running the 2 hour marathon.

HOST

Every new record teaches us more about our outer limits. The definition of humanity...

FX - Sports Commentator: Something along the lines of 'HAVE YOU EVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE THAT'

...rewritten.

But what happens when those limits are reached? How do we keep pushing forward?

DR. SHUKLA

We gave them a presentation, told them that they would be part of the most advanced performance enhancement program the world had ever seen.

HOST

This is the story of the project that dared to find out.

ARCHIVE CLIPS

Project Hermes

Project Hermes

'Project Hermes is unlike anything that has ever been attempted before'

'The head of Project Hermes today spoke'

'Within a year we will use all the science and expertise at our disposal to help a man run the 100m in under 9 seconds.'

'Nine seconds/under nine seconds/nine seconds'

'We're talking Performance Enhancing Drugs, EPO but also more extreme measures -'

HOST

For the first time, we talk to those involved. How did it feel for the scientists on the inside of the project?

DR. SHUKLA

You've got to understand for me this was paradise. I really felt part of something unprecedented.

HOST

What made these athletes give up their careers to take part?

DARREN

They told me what they were gonna do and my jaw just dropped
I was like. Is this a wind-up?

HOST

And what was it like for their families back at home?

JANELLE

Suddenly he was packing his bags and getting on a plane and I didn't know where he was going and I didn't know what he was doing.

HOST

Over the next forty minutes we'll look back at a controversy that changed the worlds of sport and science forever....

ARCHIVE CLIPS

*'What does this mean for the future of sport?
For the future of the human race... '*

DR. SHUKLA

My name is Dr. Bansri Shukla, I am a geneticist and author, I was one of the lead scientists responsible for delivering Project Hermes.

DARREN

Um. Yeah. I'm Darren Jones, I'm a retired sprinter, and I was one of the athletes who took part.

JANELLE

My name is Janelle Mason. I'm a primary school teacher and campaigner.

My son Julian Mason was a sprinter, and he signed up for Project Hermes.

And, you know

Not a day goes by without me wishing he hadn't.

DR. SHUKLA

(Talking to us as we set up) Come in to my office sorry sorry it's a bit of a mess

Scientist's are all the same you know, Clean lab, messy desk!

(Sitting down, mic'd up)

Project Hermes was set up just over seven years ago as a collaboration between XiCorp petrochemical and a variety of tech firms, pharmaceutical companies and a major sportswear brand.

The companies had come together and agreed to fund a unique research project with a very clear goal.

'What would it take to allow a human being to run the 100m in under nine seconds?'

FX - Gun going off. Athletes running. Crowd roaring.

The nine second barrier has long been considered physically impossible.

The official world record for the men's 100m sprint has stood at nine point 58 seconds since 2009.

FX - Commentary. Berlin 2009 Hundred Metres Final. Usain Bolt breaks the world record.

DR. SHUKLA

The task was to consider how we might shave off that point five eight of a second, which in sprinting terms is a lifetime.

The project had received special dispensation from the US government, so we could feel free to work without any regulatory bodies looking over our shoulder. I packed my bags, moved to Oregon and got to work.

For six years I was surrounded by some of the finest biochemists, mathematicians, sports scientists and geneticists, developing a program we were confident would succeed.

But in order to find out, we were gonna need athletes.

FX - Sound of a door opening. Dog barking. Darren shows us round his house.

DARREN

Come in. Come in. *(To dog)* Don't mind her. She's alright.

He is showing us around his house, showing mementoes from his career.

These are some things I've kept from my career. S'my Great Britain top. England, Commonwealth Games.

COMMENTATOR

And it's Jones Jones is going to take this Darren Jones wins in 10.21! And he's through to the semi-final with room to spare -

DARREN

Junior Medals. Gold. Gold. Silver! Don't know what happened there -

COMMENTATOR

A fantastic run from Jones there and you can see he's a sprinter determined to make an impact on the bigger stage -

He's sitting down now.

DARREN

I had a good career. Not the best, but decent. I was making it work. Enjoying myself. And then -

NEWS CLIP

'The sprinter Darren Jones has been banned for two years after testing positive for the prohibited substances testosterone and EPO'

DARREN

When I was young my coach, after a run of poor results he took me aside and he said, you know why you're falling behind, don't you? You can keep burying your head in the sand, or you can step up.

The way he saw it the difference between someone using PEDs and someone who weren't was like, one percent. But in the 100m, that's a metre. And I decided I didn't want no-one getting a metre headstart on me.

DR. SHUKLA

Sprinting at these speeds, training at these levels, this is not a natural thing to do to the body.

DARREN

You look at the top 30 times in history. Usain Bolt's the only one on that list not a dooper. The only one. So when does it stop becoming cheating and just become a part of sprinting?

COMMENTATOR

If what we're hearing is true about Darren Jones then it's another sad day for British Athletics -

DARREN

I remember they called me up, all serious, and were like, Mr. Jones we need you to come in, there's a problem with your test, and I was like, well that's it then.

TALKING HEAD

I think it's disgraceful, I think there's no place for it, and I think we should start thinking about lifetime bans -

DARREN

I lost my lottery funding, my sponsorship. I had no other skills, you know, no qualifications. I couldn't do nothing. I tried to get jobs, call in favours but

I'd been planning for the Olympics and now I found myself sleeping on my auntie's floor. No home. No job. No money.

INTERVIEWER

How did that feel?

DARREN

Hm.

It was tough. You know. I went to. Went to some dark places.

It was in the middle of that period that I had two phonecalls. The first one was from Project Hermes. The second was from Jules.

FX - A Clip of Jules being interviewed.

JULES

'My name is...is Julian Mason. I'm nineteen years old. And I run the 100m and 200m'

COMMENTATOR

(end of a race) And it's Mason and Campbell, Mason and Campbell and Mason takes it! 10.32 Seconds and I tell you you are going to be hearing a lot about this young man over the next few years.

JANELLE

(At the front door)

Hi nice to meet you, I'm Janelle

(Inviting us in)

Can I get you anything? Tea? Coffee?

(Settled down now)

I'll just. I need a moment to -

Ok.

(Showing us photos.)

This is him aged oh I don't know about three or four. Look at that smile.

That's him on a sports day I think.

My Julian was always fast. He loved to run. As soon as he could walk he was running.

FX - Old video footage of Janelle and other parents cheering.

JANELLE

Go on! Go on Jules! You got this! You got -

JANELLE

I took him to the local athletics club when he was ten years old, try and channel some of his energy and he just took to it.

He was a natural. It looked like he was floating over the track.

JANELLE

We just got out of the county trials. Tell your auntie what happened...

JULES

(shy) I came first

JANELLE

Woooo! Show her your medal that's it hold it up

DARREN

I'd known Jules since he was twelve. I'm eight years older but we came through at the same athletics club, the Camberwell Harriers.

JANELLE

Of course I remember Darren. The club was so proud of him. All the younger sprinters would follow him around

DARREN

I remember we did this promo where they brought me back to interview to some of young sprinters on camera, and I'd ask them about their heroes, and what their dream was, things like that, and when I got to Jules I was like -

FX - Footage. Youtube clip. Darren interviewing Jules.

DARREN

So come on, what's your dream?

JULES

Um, yeah, I wanna be the fastest man in the world.

DARREN

I laughed, you know, I was like, good for you man. Good luck with that.

JANELLE

He'd watch Bolt's videos, over and over. He'd say to me all the time, imagine being the best mum, I wanna be the best.

Aged 14 UK Athletics came to me and said he was almost certainly a future Olympian. An Olympic Athlete. My boy!

Who knows what could have happened if he'd kept going.

NEWS CLIP

Controversy struck the athletics world today, after five athletes turned their back on professional competition to take part in a performance enhancement research program funded by -

DR. SHUKLA

We knew from the off that we'd have to be very careful about which athletes we approached to take part in the project. The conversations about doping were very sensitive -

DARREN

I grew up hearing about organised doping projects. They're an open secret with athletes. BALCO, in San Francisco. The Russian thing.

*FX - News Clips about Balco/Russian Doping Scandal***DARREN**

So when Project Hermes approached me I thought this was no different.

DR. SHUKLA

It was imperative that the athletes we selected had run the 100m in under 10.2 seconds. That was our baseline.

DARREN

My PB was 10.12.

DR. SHUKLA

We needed athletes who would be discrete, and who had motivation to put their athletics career on hold

DARREN

There were a few other guys serving doping bans.

DR. SHUKLA

We knew that given what we were going to put these men through, the compensation had to be very high.

DARREN

I mean the money they were offering. It was alot.

INTERVIEWER

How much?

DARREN

Life-changing. So that got me in the room.

DR. SHUKLA

We gave them a presentation, told them that they would be part of the most advanced performance enhancement program the world had ever seen.

DARREN

My jaw just dropped. I was like. Is this a wind-up?

Science fiction, you know..

In the end I was one of only two British athletes who signed up for the project. The other one was Jules.

JANELLE

Darren and Jules. They were. They were close.

DARREN

We'd stayed in touch. We'd meet up for coffee and talk about running, girls, life.

JANELLE

If Darren had asked him to walk off a cliff I think he would have done it.

DARREN

He was way more talented than I ever was. My times were starting to drop off while his just kept improving.

JANELLE

Jules was dominant, so dominant in his age group in England, but he'd get obsessed with results happening somewhere else in the world. He'd run ten point one, win at the nationals, and he'd be distraught because some kid in Jamaica or the States had run nine point nine.

DARREN

There comes a point in every athlete's life, at about eighteen, nineteen, where you realise that even if you work your hardest you're never gonna be Usain Bolt. Michael Johnson. And that stings.

JANELLE

He would say to me that although he was fast, he wasn't fast enough.

He might make the Olympics but definitely wouldn't be a record holder. I would try and tell him that's an achievement in his own right but

DARREN

He was different to me. For me it was about making a living. Competing. For Jules. It was about the times. If he couldn't be the fastest, he felt like he was nowhere.

JANELLE

He would suffer from. I don't know if I should call it depression but

DARREN

I don't know how he heard about the Project. Probably the same way I did.

He came to me, and he was like, Darren, tell me about this thing you've signed up for. How fast do they think you're gonna go. And I said they were aiming for sub nine and something in his eyes just went -

JANELLE

There's no way Julian would've volunteered for that without Darren.

DARREN

Why would I pressure him into it? It's nothing to me whether he does it or not. He wanted to go fast. This was his chance to do that.

JANELLE

I remember it so clearly. He sat me down and he said Mum, I'm quitting athletics.

What? What are you talking about?

This was his whole life, his dream.

INTERVIEWER

How much did he tell you about the project?

JANELLE

Nothing. Not a thing.

INTERVIEWER

Why d'you think that was?

JANELLE

Because he knew I'd have stopped him.

INTERVIEWER

What would you have said?

JANELLE

I'd have told him to wake up. I'd have told him that nothing is worth this. Worth what these people are asking.

DR. SHUKLA

When we got the call saying Julian Mason was interested in signing up, we were all, you know, really excited. He was one of the most promising young sprinters in the world at the time.

JANELLE

Suddenly he was packing his bags and getting on a plane and I didn't know where he was going and I didn't know what he was doing.

DARREN

Next thing I knew he was texting me saying, bro, I'm coming with you. And I was like, great. A friendly face. Maybe I shoulda tried to talk him out of it or something but. Guy knew his own mind.

I don't think either of us could've imagined what came next.

FX - Plane Taking off.

DR. SHUKLA

The day the athletes arrived was like Christmas. All these years of theory, of hypothesis, suddenly we could get to work

DARREN

When we got there, it was unbelievable. I'd never seen anything like it. The money that had gone into this thing.

DR. SHUKLA

The best facilities. Most comfortable accommodation. Everything had to be perfect. And even more difficult, we had to keep it a secret.

JANELLE

I had no idea where he was in the world. None. Once Julian left I didn't hear from him for weeks.

DARREN

They sat us down and went through the rules of the project

DR. SHUKLA

No environmental manipulation, things like thinner air, faster tracks, tailwinds, all of which would have got the times down.

DARREN

They kept saying, it's all about you. Your bodies.

DR. SHUKLA

All augmentation had to be internal, biological, not mechanical. No prostheses.

DARREN

We were like OK OK we get it this is going on a bit

And then they said

DR. SHUKLA

We told them. Look. You will all be well paid for being here, but there is a one million dollar bonus for the athlete that posts the fastest time during this process.

DARREN

I was like.

I'm sorry say that again.

JANELLE

Blood money. That's what it was. There's no other word for it.

DR. SHUKLA

We knew that the athletes couldn't just race the clock. We needed to make it a proper race so that they would push themselves.

DARREN

They kept telling us, over and over. This isn't a test. It's a competition.

FX - Bleep test. 'Start at level one. Beep'

DARREN

The training was hard. Really hard.

Sound of a buzzer going off. Athletes panting.

DARREN

They knew everything about me. The way my body behaved. They had a perfectly tailored training program for each of us. Every minute of every day was accounted for.

DR. SHUKLA

Our nutritionists complemented the athlete's diets with synthetic, specially designed foods.

DARREN

It was disgusting. Seriously.

DR. SHUKLA

The athletes were then put on the performance enhancing drugs you would expect, testosterone, EPO, adrenaline, designed to complement each athlete's body -

DARREN

I gotta say there was something um I dunno, nice about doing it and not having the stress, the worry about getting caught. I could just focus on training.

INTERVIEWER

How long did this go on?

DARREN

About three months.

DR. SHUKLA

We needed the athletes' bodies to start responding to the PEDs. Once they started to show significant gains, they were sent to me. It was time for my speciality.

FX - We hear clips from a Science Documentary, talking about the human genome.

DARREN

Gene editing.
I still remember the first time they said that to me. I was like. What are you talking about? I used to watch X-Men when I was a kid.

DR. SHUKLA

I've always been fascinated by genetics. What makes us tick, you know, what makes us who we are on a biological level.

My hero as a little girl was Rosalind Franklin. If she could've seen where we'd end up, where her research would take us -

We are now in the position where we can enhance an athlete's body not just chemically but in a more permanent way, by altering their genome. Why inject the EPO hormone when, better yet, you can inject the gene that encodes for that hormone.

To do this we use a technology known as CRISPR/Cas9

DARREN

They kept talking about CRISPR editing I was like what are you talking about.

DR. SHUKLA

CRISPR stands for Clustered Regularly Interspaced Palindromic Repeats.

DARREN

Salt n'vinegar CRISPR

DR. SHUKLA

It works like a cut and paste tool. Using special proteins it targets a part of the genome, snips it out, and replaces it with something else.

JANELLE

The thing that I've said again and again, there should've been more regulation. They didn't know how safe this technology was, how it would affect them. Nobody had ever done it before on a scale like this. My boy was a guinea pig.

DR. SHUKLA

I'll give you an example, myostatin is a protein that inhibits muscle growth, so using CRISPR we added a gene that acted as a myostatin suppressor and then -

DARREN

It was mad. I started making gains in a week that used to take me months.

DR. SHUKLA

In another instance we used the vascular endothelial growth factor gene to help sprout new vessels in the muscles, increasing bloodflow and oxygen supply

DARREN

That acid burn you get, you know, that was gone. Just. Gone.

DR. SHUKLA

You know, for an athlete, there is good pain and irrelevant pain. Good pain warns us against danger. Irrelevant pain is the type that athletes experience all the time, when they reach -

DARREN

The wall.

DR. SHUKLA

So we inhibited it. We modulated the levels of endorphins and enkephalins.

INTERVIEWER

Was that safe? Inhibiting pain?

DR. SHUKLA

Of course. And imagine what it could do for cancer sufferers, for other chronic illnesses..

DARREN

On week seven I tore a muscle in my calf. That's a four week lay-off, minimum. I was back in the gym in five days.

DR. SHUKLA

We had different treatments for different athletes, to regulate glucose levels, to influence skeletal adaptation to exercise, to help with respiration

DARREN

My body just felt, completely different. I had to learn what it was capable of all over again.

DR. SHUKLA

The outer limits. Being pushed. We were able to successfully reconfigure each athlete's body to develop more fast twitch muscle fibres in their legs.

DARREN

The difference was amazing. The power I was producing.

DR. SHUKLA

You've got to understand for me this was paradise. I really felt part of something unprecedented. I would go home every night, and I would feel lightheaded with happiness at the work I'd achieved.

DARREN

I was ready to race, you know, I was feeling faster and faster in training, smashing all my PBs. But they wouldn't let us.

DR. SHUKLA

There was one last piece of the puzzle to put into place before we did our first official race attempt.

The most important part of the 100m.

DARREN

The start.

FX - 'On your mark. Set'

DARREN

Getting your body up to top speed, in the shortest time possible. That's what makes a sprinter.

JANELLE

Jules always had a terrible start. He was too tall. Once he was up and running he was the fastest in the field but at the beginning. It was like he didn't even hear the gun!

DR. SHUKLA

We knew we'd have to improve the athlete's reaction times if we wanted to get close to sub nine.

The program wasn't just about muscle growth and development, but also sharpening the nervous system.

FX - Starting gun goes off.

DR. SHUKLA

The sound of the gun has to travel to the ear, which has to send a signal to the brain, which then has to process that signal, make a decision and send a second signal down the neurons to the muscles to tell them to start running. It takes too long. So we thought, how do we speed that up.

JANELLE

One of the things that haunts me the most, having found out what went on there, is the what they did to their nervous system. The thought of him being in that much pain

DR. SHUKLA

The penaeid shrimp has some of the fastest reaction times in the animal kingdom. It does this by surrounding the neural pathways with a sort of conducting fluid.

The biotechnology team were able to develop a synthetic that mimicked the effects of this fluid and were, successfully, able to perform temporary transplants into the athlete's bodies

DARREN

Shrimp juice. That's what they put in us.

The procedure hurt, man. Hurt so much.

You'd be walking down corridors and

Sound of screaming far away.

DARREN

And you'd hear the screams and you'd know that that was Jules, or Miguel, or Anton, and they were getting their nerve injection and that you'd be next.

DR. SHUKLA

I would feel awful. I still do. We knew that the procedure would be painful and we tried to do everything we could to mitigate that but

DARREN

I can still feel it. Pain like you wouldn't believe.

DR. SHUKLA

We all hated doing that to them. We hoped it would be worth it.

FX - The sound of the world. Busy. Noisy. Unclear.

DARREN

But then
But when it finally takes effect,

FX - The sound of the world changes. Slows. Becomes more detailed. Focused.

DARREN

It's like the best drug in the world. You know when you watch a Youtube video on half speed, it's like everything is like that.

Sound of someone talking in slo-mo.

I felt like I had all the time I wanted. Like I could dodge anything, catch anything.

DR. SHUKLA

It was incredible. Some reaction times went up by as much as 28 percent.

FX - Slo-mo sound of On Youuuur Mark. Seet. Gun.

DARREN

When the starting pistol fires you feel like you have ages to respond when actually

FX - Gun goes in normal time

DARREN

It's milliseconds.

DR. SHUKLA

The potential uses for this treatment are so exciting. What it could do for firefighters. Surgeons. Ambulance drivers.

DARREN

After a few days it would wear off and suddenly it was like you were wearing concrete boots. Everything seemed so dull. And you couldn't wait until your next round.

DR. SHUKLA

Five months in and the athletes were ready. The technology was in place. There was nothing left to do but race

DARREN

We were always told, the end of phase one of the project there would be a series of races between all of us.

JANELLE

Whenever I spoke to him he kept saying, End of phase one, Mum, that's what it's all about. But I still didn't know what he meant.

DR. SHUKLA

We wanted to give them a clear goal.

DARREN

At this point it was all a bit of a mystery you know, like, I felt faster, I felt like my times were improving but

DR. SHUKLA

We didn't expect too much progress. We wanted the athletes to have brought down their personal bests, nothing more

DARREN

I was expecting to run a 9.9, maybe. I mean my whole career sub ten was only a dream. So I was excited. We all got to the start line and we were nervous.

What happened next was

He blows his cheeks out.

DR. SHUKLA

The atmosphere round the track was a little tense.

On your marks. Set.

DARREN

We took our marks. I have never felt so focused in my entire life.

DR. SHUKLA

We'd tailored everything to dovetail to this one moment - the performance enhancing chemicals, the diet, the training, the reaction enhancers -

DR. SHUKLA

What if it didn't work?

Gun goes off.

DARREN

Soon as I heard the gun I was flying. I'd never run a race like that. To my left and my right, same thing, guys going hell for leather and up ahead, was Jules

DR. SHUKLA

Julian Mason responded far better than any of us had expected

Sound of athletes running.

DARREN

It was mad.

Every time I went into third gear, he was in fourth. Fourth gear, he was in fifth. And then -

Applause.

9.72. That's what I crossed the line in. 9.72. If that was in competition I'd be the fourth fastest guy in history.

In this race. I finished sixth of eight. And Jules had won by a mile.

Sounds of cheering, whooping.

DARREN

He finished in Nine point five seven.

FX - Usain Bolt's world record commentary

DARREN

The world record is 9.58

He beat it. On the first try.

JULES

I wanna be the fastest man in the world

JANELLE

I sometimes, my mind wanders and I try and think about what he might have achieved if he'd stayed clean, if he'd done things the proper way.

How I might one day have seen him get his medal, sing the anthem, adverts on the telly, all of that. Instead of doing this behind closed doors. In some aircraft hanger.

DARREN

Part of me was like, oh. It was that easy. It sorta felt, underwhelming. But Julian was gassed.

DR. SHUKLA

The nine point five seven was a huge moment. But our goal was sub nine seconds, and that was still a long way off.

DARREN

After that race the training doubled in intensity.

We were all still working hard but now, you could tell, it was all about Jules. It started to feel like the rest of us were there just to make up the numbers.

DR. SHUKLA

So much of what holds back human progress is mental. They used to think the four minute mile was impossible. After Roger Bannister all of a sudden you had dozens of runners breaking four minutes. Today, a good club runner can do it. The impossible to the everyday.

Science works in much the same way. Things are impossible, right up until they aren't.

DARREN

We kept training. Kept racing each other. Jules was getting faster and faster and dragging us all along in his slipstream -

DR. SHUKLA

He ran 9.55, 9.51, 9.49

DARREN

It was mad. Every race a faster time

DR. SHUKLA

9.4, 9.35, 9.32

DARREN

And then it sorta, levelled off

DR. SHUKLA

9.32, 9.33, 9.32. Disaster.

DARREN

He couldn't get under that. Me, I was stuck at around 9.6. But still they kept working us.

DR. SHUKLA

We'd reached a plateau, and we were worried.

INTERVIEWER

What about?

DR. SHUKLA

That this was it. The maximum a man could achieve. These men had given up their lives, their careers to take part in this. We'd put them through an incredible amount, physically and mentally.

I knew that what we'd achieved already was remarkable. But

DARREN

The mood changed. People's tempers started to fray.

Jules was devastated. He was like, no, we got to push further, you got to solve this. I wanna go faster. I was like, mate, you're running 9.3, you know, what else do you want.

JANELLE

I think that he felt, given everything he'd given up to be there, that he had to keep going. If he'd come home then -

DARREN

I started to worry about him. Turns out I wasn't the only one.

JANELLE

He facetimed me and he didn't seem himself. He was snapping at me. Aggressive. So that was it. I said I'm coming to get you.

I booked myself some flights. I was determined to bring him home. I think any mother in that situation would have done the same.

DR. SHUKLA

We weren't keeping the athletes there against their will, remember. They were excited by the project. They wanted to be part of it.

We were just in a difficult moment, all of us.

JANELLE

I didn't have the money for the flights. I had to put it on a credit card. I'm still paying it off. A bill came on Tuesday.

I got there and I hired a car, it was, I'd never driven on the other side of the road

When I finally got there and it looked like a prison. There were fences, a guard manhandled me, treated me like a criminal. I said well I'm not leaving. I'm not leaving until I see my son.

I stood out there in the heat for an hour and then a woman came out, some handler, and she brought me to a room and told me to wait there. And twenty minutes later Julian came out.

He wasn't himself. He looked different. His body. And he seemed edgy. I asked him if he was alright and he told me he was fine. But there was something in his eyes.

I said please darling enough now. Come home with me. But he wouldn't. I said, alright, well let's drive into the city and get lunch. He wouldn't do that either.

I don't know.

If I'd been able to convince him then maybe

Maybe he'd

But I couldn't. And eventually I gave up and came home.

DARREN

After that, Jules started pushing for more intense training, more gene treatments, kept pushing his body -

He wasn't himself.

I shoulda helped him I suppose, but by this point I was going through a tough time. The relentless training and testing was getting to me. The monotony.

I was desperate to go home. See my family, my friends. It just didn't feel right anymore.

One day I just, I started hallucinating. I would think I was dead, that I was I dunno

Invisible

They said it was nothing to do with the treatments I'd been through but

This kept happening for about a week

And then one night, they found me, I was bleeding, in the middle of the complex, my head was bruised, my hands. I had no idea how I got there.

DR. SHUKLA

When we found Darren was a worrying moment. I'll admit I wondered, are we pushing these men too hard. Are these side effects we haven't anticipated?

DARREN

They took me in for psychological testing, scans all of that, and eventually said I was ok to continue

DR. SHUKLA

It was an unrelated issue. Thank god.

DARREN

I don't know
I didn't feel like I could say no, you know.

DR. SHUKLA

After that the wellbeing of all the athletes became paramount. I mean it was already, but even more so.

DARREN

Looking back, I dunno. I should have just gone home.

But they said it was almost over.

DR. SHUKLA

We were still point three of a second from achieving the goal.

We looked for every angle, every possible thing we could do to solve the problem. But it's simple physics. The stronger the muscles were the heavier they got. We had to make the legs lighter somehow. That was the solution.

And then we found it

DARREN

They flew this guy in from Australia.

DR. SHUKLA

Dr. James Campbell.

He'd pioneered a technique that radically reduced the weight of cow carcasses ahead of transportation

DARREN

They sat us down and said, look, this next stage of the testing is completely voluntary, you know, we're not sure how safe it's going to be or what the long term effects are

DR. SHUKLA

Specifically, he'd worked out a way to demineralise the cow's bones so that they remained structurally stable but the weight was vastly decreased. It was incredibly impressive.

DARREN

- if it works, it'll make you fly like superman, basically. But when they described what it was -

DR. SHUKLA

We made sure to tell them the risks. We wanted their eyes to be open.

DARREN

I said no. I don't want you doing that to me. That's too much.

They said fine, it's your choice.

Jules, of course, was up for it.

JANELLE

When I think about him putting his hands up like that -

DR. SHUKLA

I was relieved. Relieved.

Julian was our best hope at this working. His body had responded incredibly efficiently to all our other procedures. So when he volunteered.

JANELLE

They took him, and they operated on him, and they left him with hollow legs.

DR. SHUKLA

The procedure was a complete success.

The bones were demineralised. Without losing muscle mass Julian's legs had now lost thirty percent of their weight.

There was a short period where he had to adjust to the new sensations, walking, resistance training and finally back into sprint training.

DARREN

We were kept around as training partners. We were going to take part in one last race. An attempt at the sub-9.

INTERVIEWER

How long had you been there by this point?

DARREN

Almost. Almost a year.

DR. SHUKLA

We knew we might only have one chance at running a sub-nine second time given the potentially fragile condition of Julian's bones.

The day of the attempt we were incredibly nervous.

Sub nine. This was it, this was what the whole project had been building up to. Julian's body was in perfect condition. He said that he felt fast.

JANELLE

He had been running his whole life.

I often wonder to myself, late at night.

I wonder if he knew that that was the last time he would ever do it.

DARREN

We all gathered on the race track.

FX- Sound of footage 'everyone ready etc'

DARREN

I looked across at him and said how do you feel. And he looked at me and said 'Amazing.'

DR. SHUKLA

We did a conditions check, all perfectly controlled. And then suddenly

On your mark. Set.

Gun goes off.

DR. SHUKLA

They were off.

Sound of a small group of people cheering 'go on go on etc'

DARREN

We all get off to a good start, obviously, but already 10m in you can tell he's pulling ahead

DR. SHUKLA

I'm stood on the observation platform and I'm watching him move like no human being has ever moved before.

DARREN

20m and I'm already looking at his back and I'm like I don't believe what I'm seeing here

DR. SHUKLA

The speed of his legs looked like a cartoon, the strength of his muscles and the lightness of his bones

DARREN

Watch that footage. Look at his face. As he's running. He's smiling. He's grinning at just how fast he's going. Like a little kid.

Fx - More shouting

DR. SHUKLA

We're all looking at the clock now

How fast is he going how fast is he going?

DARREN

The rest of us are chasing trying to keep up but really we're watching to see what time he'll finish in.

DR. SHUKLA

80m. 90m . 95m

And then

FX - A man sprinting, whoosh

He crossed the line and we looked at the clock and

My god

DARREN

Eight

point

seven

Two.

DR. SHUKLA

8.72! Not just sub-nine but almost a third of a second under it. It was magnificent. What we had achieved. Magnificent.

JANELLE

'8.72' Who cares! When he used to run for his country it wasn't just about the time. It was about the competition, the other athletes, the crowd watching him. But this, behind closed doors. It's just a number.

DR. SHUKLA

The reaction was so gratifying.

NEWS FOOTAGE

Hard to believe what we're watching.

There had been rumours but this is way beyond

Thrilling absolutely thrilling but one wonders about the ramifications for

DR. SHUKLA

People understood that we had achieved a remarkable thing. A breakthrough for sports, for science, for transhumanism.

DARREN

That night we celebrated. Jules was buzzing. But I dunno, I couldn't feel excited.

They came and they said that the project was wrapping up for us, that we'd be paid in full.

And then it was all over.

We got to go home.

JANELLE

Julian came back to live with me.

He had a million dollar prize in his bank account. He tried to give me some. I wouldn't touch it.

There was a lot of press attention, of course. He loved it. Cameras outside our house

FX - Loads of journalists crowding around Jules.

JOURNALISTS

Julian Julian how does it feel to be the fastest man of all time

JULES

It feels good you know. I'm buzzing.

JANELLE

He never ran again. The doctors said it was too dangerous. He could still walk, but, not well.

At the slightest knock he'd get these little fractures to his leg and then be off his feet for weeks. Like he was made of glass.

DARREN

I went home. Paid off my debts.

I tried to get on with my life. I had money but no purpose. Running was all I knew. If it hadn't been over before it was now.

At first people would ask me to comment all the time, everyone wanted to know what it had been like. But I couldn't talk about it.

INTERVIEWER

Why not?

DARREN

Just wanted to forget if I'm honest.

DR. SHUKLA

We published our research and we moved onto other things.

Of course, we got a lot of criticism. Mostly from the sporting world.

NEWS FOOTAGE

'Publishing this research is basically giving athletes a playbook for cheating. It's disgraceful'

DARREN

Thing is, far as I'm aware, they can't test for this stuff. Who's to tell if an athlete's got an advantage because he's a genetic freak, or he's been through gene doping.

DR. SHUKLA

To me, as an outsider, it still seems like sport is in denial. They demand more and more from these sportsmen and women but refuse to publicly acknowledge that the only way these levels can be met is with the help of science.

First there was doping, now gene editing.

Gene editing is coming, whether they like it or not. They can either embrace it or keep fighting it, but it's coming either way.

DARREN

The future of athletics? I dunno. I worry about it.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

DARREN

These organisations, they need to defend their athletes more. They need to stop lying

The more you keep lying to a crowd, pretending everyone's clean, the more they're gonna get fed up. Turn off.

INTERVIEWER

So you're saying doping should be legalised?

DARREN

I'm saying tell the truth. Start fresh. Take the stigma away from these young men and women who are being pushed to do this by their coaches, their national organisations, their sponsors.

There's only so many times you can fool a crowd and expect them to go along with it.

JANELLE

Gradually the excitement over what Jules had done died down.

There were less and less people wanting to talk to him. People move on, don't they? Before long we were left alone. I think that was hard for him to accept.

DARREN

About four months after I was back I collapsed one day at the gym. Doctors found, the EPO gene I took, it's made my blood thick, like sludge.

I had to have a stent fitted, I take blood thinners every day. My risk of stroke has doubled.

DR. SHUKLA

This was an expected potential side effect of the treatment. We explained it in detail to the athletes. We did everything we could to mitigate against it, but -

DARREN

My body will never be the same. But, you know, I guess I knew that.

At least I got off better than Jules.

NEWS FOOTAGE

The mother of the athlete Julian Mason has called out the organisers of Project Hermes for refusing to acknowledge responsibility for her son's illness

JANELLE

Six months after he got back from Project Hermes, I was sitting in a doctors surgery and watching on as Julian was diagnosed with advanced non-Hodgkin Lymphoma.

What they did to him, it altered his genetic makeup. The body rejected it. It rebelled.

DR. SHUKLA

There is no proof that Julian's illness was caused by anything that went on in that time. None whatsoever.

INTERVIEWER

Do you really believe that?

DR. SHUKLA

It doesn't matter what I believe. There's no proof. Was it possible that our treatments could have had a carcinogenic effect? Of course.

Can I one hundred percent say that it caused Julian's cancer. No.

JANELLE

They made him sick. They know that they did. And I won't rest until they apologise for that.

DR. SHUKLA

None of the other athletes experienced anything like this, you know.

INTERVIEWER

But Julian did get cancer.

DR. SHUKLA

Look. I'm very sorry that it happened

We all are but

What I will say though, is that he knew the risks. And he signed up willingly.

JANELLE

He tried to stay cheerful during his illness, but it was a horrible thing to watch.

I could see his body changing, day on day.

Something so beautiful, so strong, weakening in front of your eyes

It was very aggressive. In the course of a few months he just,

He

He wasted away.

And that

You know

That's a terrible thing for a parent.

To watch his body, this beautiful body that you've seen grow from the length of your arm to a six foot athlete, to watch that process in reverse. To see him get smaller. Weaker.

To start

Start feeding him again.

I'm sorry

INTERVIEWER

(Softly) Are you alright? Do you want us to stop.

JANELLE

No. I'm. I'm fine.

My Julian died on a Wednesday, in the middle of the afternoon. I wasn't there. I'd gone to get a sandwich.

DARREN

I went to the funeral. It was tough man. His mum, she wouldn't -

JANELLE

I saw him there of course. But. I didn't want anything to do with any of them

DARREN

He was my friend you know, and and whether or not what happened to him was because of what we went through -

JANELLE

Let me tell you something, because I think it's important. These were young, black men, from poor, you know, working class backgrounds. And these people they said to them we can give you all the money you've ever dreamt of but in order for us to do that you're going to need to give us your bodies. Your health. I don't think they cared about those boys at all.

They're vampires.

DARREN

Could I have told him not to sign up. Maybe. But I didn't know what it was. I didn't know how far they were planning on going. How much they were gonna mess with our bodies so

He exhales.

DARREN

You know what

I'm sorry.

That aint true.

I knew exactly what this was. I knew the risks and I did it anyway because the world I knew had turned it's back on me and I had one thing left to sell and that was my skill.

If I hadn't signed up, who knows if Jules would have done. And he might. Might still be around.

And that does. It haunts me.

INTERVIEWER

There are people who say you put these young men's lives at risk for a publicity stunt?

DR. SHUKLA

Publicity stunt?

No.

That's not. The 100m sprint was an arbitrary goal of course it was.

But then so was the moon.

There was nothing to be gained from going to the moon. What we gained was all the innovation it took to get there.

INTERVIEWER

So what you're saying is. Whatever happened to these men was worth it?

DR. SHUKLA

I'm saying that the work we did on that project has the potential to improve the lives of countless people.

INTERVIEWER

How?

DR. SHUKLA

Ok. I'll. Let me give you some examples. Already we're on our way to eliminating cystic fibrosis, curing sickle cell anaemia. The muscle growth gene we developed for this project is now being utilised in the treatment of a variety of degenerative diseases -

INTERVIEWER

(to Janelle) Do you take comfort that the research Jules took part in might help change people's lives.

JANELLE

No.

INTERVIEWER

Not at all?

JANELLE

No. You know why? Because it won't. The only people who will benefit from these treatments will be those rich enough to afford them. The rest of us? Psh.

Look at who funded the research. Why do you think these tech companies invested in this?

So some factory worker can work an 18 hour day making phones and not get tired. That's all it is.

These developments won't make us run faster, live healthier. We'll just work longer. Work harder.

DR. SHUKLA

The fact is these young men were part of something very special.

They wanted this, they wanted to take part for the same reason that I did. Because they believed in going further than their competitors. Reaching that next frontier

JANELLE

It's been a year now, but I won't give up. The prize money Jules won, I don't care if I spend every penny of it on lawyers

Not until they've accepted responsibility and apologised for what they did to him.

He was 22 years old.

22. And for what?

I want to feel proud of what he achieved on that project. Of course I do. I wish I could. But...

DARREN

As long as we keep telling young athletes, you gotta go that extra mile, you know, you gotta give everything, then they're gonna keep putting themselves in harms way for the sake of competition.

This whole world, we're obsessed with going faster, getting better, climbing higher. More and more, you know. Way I see it, we're just gonna keep pushing forward forward forward until we drive off a cliff.

INTERVIEWER

And what about Julian?

DARREN

What about him?

INTERVIEWER

Do you think he felt the same way?

DARREN

(He laughs)

Look.

Jules gave an interview not long before he died. I remember watching it and thinking, realising, how different we were. He's sat there, in his hospital bed, looking all skinny, wires and tubes everywhere. But he doesn't look sad. Or angry.

He's laughing.

INTERVIEWER

Start by stating your name as an introduction -

JULES

My name is Julian Mason, and I'm a former athlete. *(He laughs)* Is that right?

INTERVIEWER

Do you regret signing up for the project?

JULES

Tsch. Nah.

No I don't regret it. Don't regret it at all.

The best thing I ever did was sign up for that project.

INTERVIEWER

Even if it caused your illness?

JULES

Let me tell you. I knew the risks. I went in with my eyes open.

And yeah, this I don't like

That 8.72 seconds. That feeling of going that fast. Of being the only man to ever do that, feel something no-one else has felt. I dunno. S'what we all dream of, isn't it?

I know it sounds bad and my mum would slap me for saying this but I wouldn't trade that 8.72 seconds for another eighty years.

That's me now, don't you see. In the books. I did that. That time is mine, my own. I took my body and I pushed it to its limits and it felt so good, so good.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any regrets at all?

JULES

One. Yeah.

Only one.

INTERVIEWER

And what's that?

JULES

That I didn't run faster.