

She who dares, wins



INTERVIEW

_ SARAH SPRINGMAN

former Rector of ETH ZURICH and Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire

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NOT ONE TO SHY AWAY FROM A CHALLENGE, DAME SARAH SPRINGMAN HAS SUCCESSFULLY LIVED A WORK-SPORTS BALANCE AS CIVIL ENGINEER, ACADEMIC AND TRIATHLETE - EVEN HAVING A BRUSH WITH OIL PAINTING, FLATTERING HER NEIGHBOUR'S FELINE FRIEND, HERR SCHMITT, WITH AN IMPROMPTU PORTRAIT. THE FORMER RECTOR OF ETH ZURICH TALKS ABOUT RESPECT, BRINGING NEW TALENT ON EARLY, AND HER EXPERIENCE SWIMMING IN THE 13-DEGREE ENGLISH CHANNEL WITHOUT A WETSUIT.

From an early age you focussed on a very male-dominated profession as a woman. What was the initial trigger for your passion in engineering?

I was fascinated by 'building' things, whether they were dams across streams on the beach or additions to a tree house in an oak tree that had been split in two by lightning. Construction and being constructive are motivating actions and thought processes.

You say of yourself that you are someone who likes to achieve. What influenced this sense of achievement and determination?

As the only girl, and oldest child of four, I suspect that it may have been driven by needing to show that I was active and doing things. I

am not quite sure why I have been so competitive, other than by observing the female members of the family on my mother's side, who exhibit [have exhibited] similar tendencies.

You had two very impressive careers running in parallel: in engineering and as an influential sportswoman. What's the secret sauce for such an accomplishment?

Setting different priorities at the right times, time management and some discipline. As an example, I would take about three months off work in total a year, when I was doing my doctorate, to focus on training and racing. This was spread out

throughout the year. I could fit my accessions to the geotechnical centrifuge to carry out my experimental work around this and the priority would shift from one to the other.

What have you learned during your sports career that adds value to your professional career?

I was always aware that I had overcome some very frightening experiences, such as swimming in a relay across the Channel [13°C] without a wetsuit as part of the London to Paris Triathlon Relay and starting the Ironman race swims alongside 1,500 people. This gave me courage when I faced some

challenging situations at work. 'Could it really be worse than that?', I would ask myself.

Out of all the achievements you have accomplished thus far - what are you most proud of?

I am very proud of how ETH as a whole reacted to the pandemic and how everyone pulled together on all fronts: teaching, research, innovation and in terms of supporting all groups; students and staff, as best we could and contributing to finding solutions to beat the evolving virus. I was particularly happy that we were able to hold three exam sessions with full attendance - 10,000 - 13,000 students doing on average about five exams each, over four to five weeks - with only a handful of positive COVID-19 cases.

What was your biggest failure?

That's difficult to answer, for many reasons. Apropos the pandemic, not realising that I should have argued for experimental teaching being equivalent to experimental research during the first lockdown, when students doing masters projects pretty much lost an entire semester. So we implemented it thereafter.

Both professionally and in sports you are an ambassador for diversity and equal opportunities. Where does that passion come from?

It's the right thing to do on the one hand. On the other, if one wants to develop the best team then diversity,

"If one wants to develop the best team then diversity, competence, commitment and respect for others are all essential."



Curriculum
vitae

Since February 2022: Principal of St. Hilda's College at the University of Oxford

2015 - January 2022: Rector of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology [ETH Zurich]

2022 New Year Honours: Made Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire [DBE] for services to engineering and sports administration

2018: Honorary doctorates from the University of Sheffield and Wollongong

2016: Honorary doctorate from the University of Bern

2013: Honorary doctorate from the University of Bath

2012: Made Commander of the Order of the British Empire [CBE] for services to sport, specifically the triathlon

2007 - 2009: Head of the Network for Natural Hazards at ETH Zurich [HazNETH]

2001 - 2005 / 2009 - 2011: Head of the Institute for Geotechnical Engineering at ETH Zurich

1997: Appointed Professor of Geotechnical Engineering at ETH Zurich, making her its first female civil engineering professor

1997: Made Officer of the Order of the British Empire [OBE]

1990: Joined the University of Cambridge as a lecturer

1988: Became the first female research fellow at Magdalene College

1984 - 1989: Doctoral student at Magdalene College, in the Cambridge Soil Mechanics Group, graduated with PhD in 1989

1984: Master's degree [MPhil] in soil mechanics from St. Catharine's College, University of Cambridge

1979 - 1983: Worked for the Alexander Gibb engineering firm on a range of geotechnical engineering projects in the UK, Australia and Fiji

1978: Bachelor's degree in engineering sciences from Girton College, University of Cambridge



Sporting
career

Still competing in rowing

2007 - 2012: Chair of the British Triathlon Federation

1992 - 1996 / 2008 - 2016: Vice-President of the International Triathlon Union [ITU]

Springman played an important part in establishing triathlon among modern multisport disciplines. She was a key figure behind its Olympic status and its inclusion in the Commonwealth Games

She also played a leading role in convincing the International Paralympic Committee in 2010 to add the paratriathlon to the programme for the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro

1984 - 1993: sporting career at the elite level:

- **20 European ETU medals** in individual and team competition
- **Five-time competitor in the Ironman competition** in Hawaii, the World Triathlon Long Distance Championships, **twice achieving fifth place**
- **1985 and 1986:** European Triathlon Long Distance Champion in the first two years of the championships
- **1988: European Champion** over the Olympic distance

competence, commitment and respect for others are all essential. It's also about 'evening up' and helping those who might otherwise be discriminated against, either intentionally or through ignorance, to be able to aspire. Much can be done behind the scenes so that no one knows.

Ergon believes in equal opportunities and is actively promoting young talent through initiatives like Informatiktage, vocational training (apprenticeships), active cooperation with student associations, and schools for open days and career insights. How do you assess such commitment?

Ergon has a huge advantage in that everyone can see that you have an outstanding female leader and 'if you can see it, you can be it'! But 'one swallow does not a summer make', to quote Shakespeare, so the entire company has to design itself into being a place where women can work through their various lifetimes - should they be single, a partner, a mother, a carer? Inspiring young women to see that science and engineering are fun is an important start and this needs to begin before puberty, in my view. They need to be attracted and challenged in the right way through this period and the schools are as important as parents and grandparents. Recruiting and retaining is crucial too: the jobs need to lead to a contribution that can be seen as making a difference in the world.

Which person has particularly shaped your professional career?

I had various mentors at different stages in my career, as an engineer and in my parallel lives in sport, sport administration and the territorial army. All of them encouraged me to apply for various roles and helped me to prepare to win them.

What advice would you give to someone who is taking on a leadership position for the first time?

Don't expect anyone to do something difficult or dangerous that you wouldn't do first.

What can you reveal about yourself that few people know and that will surprise readers?

I turned up at a pre-Christmas dinner 'one hour oil-painting session' with members of the Rector's team and despite never having done it before, managed to sketch and paint a passable likeness of the neighbour's beautiful black and white cat, Herr Schmitt, with a rather smeary, blotchy and colourful background. I still have it. />

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