

'I set off through the moving obstacles, then bang – into the water'

David Spiegelhalter on being the first professor of risk to face *Total Wipeout* and its big red balls

It's all my daughter's fault. She thought it would be a good idea to appear on *Total Wipeout* as a father-and-daughter team, so we sent in our forms with 10,000 others and forgot about it. The next thing I know I'm in Argentina risking my body, my reputation and my sanity. All part of the modern academic's job.

For the benefit of mature readers, *Wipeout* is a TV programme featuring a colourful postmodern assault course. Its essential idea is to get adults to big themselves up about how cool and

strong they are, and then to belittle them utterly with fiendish activities that involve repeated falls into water and mud. This is accompanied by the relentlessly derisory commentary of a studio-bound *Top Gear* presenter. It is staggeringly popular with children, and those adults who have not grown out of slapstick. Like me. Since my alter ego is "Professor Risk", I considered it an obligation under my terms of employment that I should apply.

The auditions were terrifying — queues of egocentric applicants in fancy dress, each with precisely one minute to impress the producers. I identified myself as a professor in the University of Cambridge in full academic fancy dress — suit, gown, mortarboard, OBE, the lot. I rambled on about how I do lots of work with schools and how *Wipeout* is a great example of the positive side of risk.

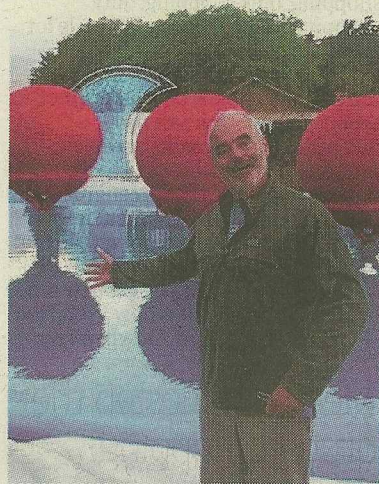
Then, for reasons that now escape me, I tried to stand on my head. I can

normally do this but had not practised in all the garb, with inevitably embarrassing results. The producer said he had never seen anything like it in his life, and I was through to the next round. There followed an obstacle course (also in gown and mortarboard) and a filmed interview.

Then I find myself on the way to Heathrow to meet the other 19 contestants in the first episode of *Winter Wipeout*. They seem to consist only of beautiful young women and muscly men: I am 40 years older than the youngest, and begin to wish that I had applied for *Round Britain Quiz* instead. But I have rarely laughed so much as in our five days together. This was the "odd job" programme: there was a penguin keeper, a wrestler, a detective, a teddy-bear maker, a voiceover artist, a boxer and a professional poker player. A producer told me later that only nice people are chosen; they don't want the usual reality-show conflict. Just humiliation.

So we all flew to Argentina for a weekend — apparently not to get around health and safety laws but for economies of scale, as many countries film at the course near Buenos Aires. But it is definitely risky, causing bruises and a couple of fractures last year, and there are numerous doctors and divers on hand. At this point I realise that I have not completed the university's risk assessment for field trips.

The top 12 in the first course get



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through to the next, more punishing round — I had done my research, of course, and reckoned that I had to do around 3 minutes 15 seconds to get through, so I had trained to do exactly this period of exercise before collapsing, gasping, in a heap. Not an Olympian regime, but the best I could manage.

I have rarely been so terrified as when waiting to start. There is no audience, just a bored Argentine film crew who have seen it all before. Best to forget the eight million or so people

who will watch it later. There is no practice. So I set off, trying to avoid the moving obstacles that are controlled by some maniac, then bang — into the water. Swim to the side, climb out and bang — in the water again. And again. And again. It finally dawns on me why everyone looks so exhausted doing the course: running along and being bashed is easy, it's all the swimming and climbing out that grinds you down. But I keep muttering the mantra: "Keep going, keep smiling, no swearing."

Then it's time for the legendary Big Red Balls. Four huge padded balls over which you can, in principle, leap rather than plummeting without dignity into the water below. I had studied the form: 2.5 per cent of contestants had managed to get across, and they were young and fit, whereas I'm old and a bit fat, so the odds were not good.

I am not going to say how I did — whether I cross those balls, defeat the ski lift, reach the final to be shot out of a catapult through a ring of fire, and go home with £10,000 will be revealed tonight. But I can admit that I did survive, thanks to padded body armour.

It's taken 35 years to build my professional reputation. If I have now destroyed it in a few minutes, the experience would almost be worth it.

Winter Wipeout is broadcast today at 6pm on BBC One. David Spiegelhalter is Professor of the Public Understanding of Risk at the University of Cambridge