



THE TOP 10 TIPS TO IMPROVING YOUR RUNNING. (DUNCAN)

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I remember watching the Olympics and I got to thinking recently, aside from training the house down, what are some of the most important lessons some of the great athletes I've known over the years have imparted to me as mechanisms by which they've improved their performances. What follows is a synopsis of that information. First up, read and experience everything you can on the topic. Running has been is probably the oldest sport there is, it has a history that spans hundreds of years. Learn what different countries and coaches did over the years to raise the bar in regards to performances. If you look back as little as 50-60 years the women's marathon world best would have steeled the men's fields anywhere in the world. How did performances improve so dramatically? Read about the early Scandinavian fartlek programs, how under Percy Cerutti Australians raised the bar in the middle distance events and Kiwi Arthur Lydiard re-wrote what was considered the norm in distance running. Then there was the spate of Japanese marathoners, and finally the Kenyan assault on the record books. One thing that you'll find in common is an amazing work ethic; an ability to push the boundaries of what was thought was the limits. But be aware, more isn't always better, there is a point of no return.....

1. Experience counts for a lot. Run with people who know and have a wealth of experience. My time working at the AIS was fantastic from that perspective. Meeting and running with the likes of Deek, Pat Carroll, etc. helped lift my own performances to new heights. Train with runners in your area who have experienced both success and failure - learn from them - don't make their mistakes. Go to running camps, join a training squad. This helps fast-track your experience in the sport. Ask questions of more experienced runners.

2. There's no "secrets". If you want to improve it comes down to hard work and recovery. There's always someone who claims to know it all and have the "secret" to success. In majority of the cases they are simply out to make a buck from some gimmick. Do your homework, go to reputable sources. Check their success rate with other runners and their proven long-term results. There are a lot of coaches out there that have produced a number of champion athletes that they'll want to tell you about, dig a little deeper and you'll find that they have also crippled many more.

3. There are no short-cuts. You have to do the work over time. To reach your potential as a runner research would suggest you've got a good decade of progressive focussed work. No matter what the endeavour, excellence requires time, running is no different. So don't look for or expect to find a short-cut - it'll end in grief. Remember, when it comes to running, patience is indeed a virtue, try to fast track your improvement by running too hard or too long too early and you'll quickly find yourself injured and sitting on the sidelines. The body takes time to adapt to the rigours of training mileage - give it that time.

4. "Train don't strain". This was a common theme espoused by great Australian distance coach Pat Clohessy and goes hand in hand with my previous point. It is all about patience. Sure there are times - which become more and more regular the more competitive you become - when you have to push yourself. However, more often than not running should be comfortable and fun. Use your heart monitor on your recovery day and keep your heart rate down. You'll often hear experienced runners talk about "hard" "easy" training. Remember, you can't train or race a tired body. This tip is an example of the principle of specificity. To race fast you must train fast but to train fast you have to be rested.

5. Recovery days are crucial.

6. Feed off others. Don't train in isolation; join a squad or training group. This makes your training fun, social and challenging when it needs to be.

7. Get off the hard stuff! Concrete and asphalt trash your legs. Spend as much of your training time as you can run over softer surfaces like trails and golf courses. When I lived in Canberra I had literally hundreds of kilometres of fire trails at my front door. It is little wonder that Canberra became the Australian epi-centre for distance running. When I bought property in Brisbane, as I intend to be a runner into my old age - I made sure it was in close proximity to trails. In short, they save your legs from the impact shock of kilometre after kilometre of hard surface running. Remember, every time your foot hits the ground when you run you're putting between 4-6 times your body weight through that individual limb about 500 times on each leg per kilometre. Do the math - that is an enormous load week in week out. Do that on an unforgiving surface and you'll soon end up trashed. You'll often find that the best runners often congregate at those locations that offer such environments - Canberra, Boulder, St. Moritz, etc. Trails are simply more forgiving on your legs. The uneven nature of such surfaces force the runner to develop the stabilizing muscles that help with balance and agility. I have often heard the analogy of trail running being to road running what free weights are to weight machines. Having said this, if you're racing on the road (or track) it is still important to get some of your sessions out on these surfaces. Again we are talking about the physiological principle of "specificity" - what you train for is what you get. Always get some training on the course surface that you will be competing on.

8. Race yourself! It doesn't matter who you are - a novice or an Olympian. Measure your improvement against yourself and not that of others. If you measure yourself against others you'll never reach YOUR potential. Take your time. Stick to a time table that you work out with your coach. There is always going to be someone a little more mature, a little faster, your objective is (over time) to reach YOUR potential. If that potential means you're at best going to be a 42 minute runner off the bike, then so be it. If your potential means you'll be the first triathlete to run 28 dead off the bike, great but build to it slowly and focus on yourself.

9. Be balanced in your approach. Prioritize aspects of your life, but don't become so focussed on your running that you let other aspects of your life slip completely. I've seen many a young triathlete launch straight out of school into being a "professional" triathlete and have nothing to show for it when they retire. I've seen triathlon decimate many a relationship - first hand in some cases for myself. Don't become so rigid and narrow that you exclude other important aspects from your life. Running and triathlon should be an important adjunct to your life, they should "be" your life. Learn this balance and you'll be a much happier and better athlete in the longer term.

10. Pick a role model. Just as there are mentors in any other profession the same can be applied to running and triathlon. There are all kinds of mental and emotional tools this will help you to draw on. If you can observe other athlete overcome seemingly impossible hurdles you will soon come to realise that anything is possible. Our sport, which is still in its infancy, still offers endless possibilities.

I sincerely hope this article helps to point you in the direction of becoming a better athlete.