

The following article was recently published on Athletics Weekly website.

What sets apart an elite runner from a club runner? Of course there are many factors, but in a nutshell it comes down to ability, hard work and desire. You can't do much about the ability that you have inherited via your parents' genes, but when it comes to training volume and quality, along with the mind-set needed to succeed, you can do much to improve. It might not win you an Olympic medal, but it will go a long way to helping you get the best out of yourself.

Those who are prepared to work harder and smarter over many years and to make training the most important focus of their everyday life will inevitably reap the success they crave. An unwavering determination will eventually bring your just desserts.

Getting better

If you are a youngster then you can expect to improve year on year with just a modicum of training. As you mature physically, so your strength levels will improve and that may be enough to shave off those vital seconds that dictate a PB. However, by a certain point and age, only hard work over a decent period will produce improvements.

But flogging yourself with no aim is counter-productive – it has to be the right work for a specific event. Doing 800m-specific sessions may open up the opportunity to run well also at 400m and 1500m, but probably will have little relevance to a 10,000m or even a marathon. Many athletes are impatient and expect success immediately – but it takes a long time to improve.

Other things needed to run well include an injury-free stretch and good health period.

Lifestyle and work or academic pressure can have a massive impact on performance, so make sure your lifestyle is as harmonious and stress-free as possible.

Never stop asking yourself or your coach why you are doing a particular session and what the expected outcomes may be (short or longer-term). It will set you a reliable pathway that has a greater chance of success.

Pace to perfection

Whether your aspirations lie on the track, roads or cross country, success can come only from a race that is run at a pace where energy levels are maximised. It doesn't matter if your target is 800m or a marathon, an ill-judged race will end in disaster. But not everyone has good pace judgment and, although pacing in a race is usually dictated by the opposition, running at the correct pace in training is essential so that the desired effects are reached.

Pacing can be classified as an art and while some runners manage relatively well in a group, left to their own devices can be erratic at best. One of the hardest things to master is running at a set pace when fatigued and getting the "feel" for a 60-second 400m on rep one can be much different to running the same pace on rep 12 with tired legs and oxygen-starved lungs. If running at a set pace is difficult, the only way to get used to the regime is lots of practice and over many different distances.

Practising alone is sometimes beneficial as you have to get into the "zone" and really feel what you're doing. This applies to not only the sterility of the track, but also identified distances on road and grass sections. The better you get at hitting your target pace, the more reliable your performances will become.

Believe anything is possible

Although sports science and physiology research continues to improve seemingly at a relentless rate, one thing that seems to remain the same is the psychological aspirations, or lack of them, in athletes.

The old mantra of "if you want it, you'll do it" does hold some relevance. I've seen countless athletes over the years overcoming adversity and, whether that comes from an inherent ability or an attitude instilled by a coach or from tough sessions that have relied upon sheer guts, is up for debate.

It got me thinking of a personal example many years ago. My one and only marathon, which I won, was a huge disappointment. I knew I was in 2hr 10min shape at worst from training data, yet I clocked 2:15. The reason? At 14miles, I felt a sharp pain in my left calf and by 15 miles I knew my race was over. So what did I do? I ran a sub-five minute mile to move away from the field and then the plan was to take a rest.

The pain grew worse and I had to make a decision to pull out or continue. I tried running on my heels on either side of my foot to alleviate the pressure. It didn't work. By 21 miles I wasn't going to drop out, I had trained too hard and too long for that, but by this time the pain

What got me through? Stubbornness, for certain. Although the final time was a personal disaster, the fact that I finished gave me immense satisfaction. That 2:15 PB is still a great even after 30 years. It was the beginning of the end of my career, but if I had dropped out, I'm not sure I could have lived with that.

The moral of my story is this: Always take a positive from anything that you do. Learn from it. Remember, everything has the potential to help you become mentally stronger.