

HOW TO ENJOY A LONG RUNNING JOURNEY

By Rob Maxwell, M.A.

It bugs me when I hear a pretty good runner state “Been there, done that”, referring to one or a group of accomplishments. At this point, they’re typically indicating that they’re not going to race much anymore. I really don’t get that one. I’ve always felt that running is a journey, not a destination. How can we define who we are as runners by races won, age groups won, or races run? If this is your goal, you’ll never reach it. Unless you’re the top runner in the world, there is somebody better! And even the very best only stay there for a brief period. Isn’t it about longevity and how you evolve along the way? To me it is. When I head to my gym in the mornings, it is not uncommon to see Reid Hughes out on his regular jog. He just chugs along, and looks to be enjoying every step, or is maybe just appreciative of each step, to be more accurate. For those who don’t know Reid, let’s just say he’s an old timer to running. He’s been doing races since Frank Shorter came to town to do the Easter Beach Run. To me, Reid’s the role model. His collection of running tales over the years is far more impressive than a few one-hit wonders and “Been there, done that”s! His PRs are long gone, but he runs because he can. And I’m equally proud of my mother, Joan Maxwell, who in her 70’s is still out towing the line. Yes, their age groups are thinner than ours, but isn’t that a testament to them? So, the question is, how do we collect a lifetime of running stories? How do we do everything in our control to keep running and enjoying our lifestyle, rather than crash and burn, and end up on the shuffle board courts? The answer is—Don’t OVERTRAIN. That’s the part we can control.

Why do runners/endurance athletes overtrain? I think the answer is two-fold. Partly it’s due to poor information, or believing poor information. Many do believe in certain training plans that are conducive to overtraining. And many refuse to accept genetics, which is not a negative. It’s a positive. Genetics determines the extent of just how FAST we can be. Yes, we can all improve, but we all have limits. From the time you’re an adolescent, your VO2 max can only change by 30%. I didn’t say once you’ve built it up it can change by 30%... I said basically, when you’re in your teens, before you ever trained. At his peak, Steve Prefontaine had a VO2 max of 84.4. So if we use this figure, this means when he was a teenager, before he ever laced up, his VO2 was already 59! Higher than just about anybody I’ve ever tested in their peak! Even the anaerobic threshold has a genetic component, with most studies concluding that it’s about 50% trainable. And a pure long distance runner (“pure” meaning they get paid big bucks to race) is typically born with a slow twitch muscle fiber percentage in the high nineties, with the fast twitch being in the single digits of percentage. So, needless to say, this type never plays football! And, your fiber type cannot be changed at all. You get the point? Genetics decides who gets paid to run and who doesn’t, not your training. It’s my observation that most people do get that, but it’s the top age groupers that seem to have the hardest time with that. They have the genes to be good and they try to do the pro’s workouts, thinking that this is what separates them... It’s not!

EMOTIONAL TRAINING

It’s my belief that the majority of overtraining comes from emotional training, the emotions being guilt or fear. If you train on a regular basis with this being your motivation, you will get hurt and you will burn out. What is fear-based training? It is putting too much emphasis on your competition and not enough on bettering yourself. If you think you have to log tons of hard

miles in a week's time because your competition is closing in on you, that is fear based thinking. If you think you're not stacking up, then that is fear based training. Guilt is also a bad one. An example of guilt-based training is if you decide you're going to hammer out a long hard run on Monday because you feel like you let yourself down in the past Sunday's race. That is nothing more than punishing your body. Guilt-based training is feeling like you've got to whip yourself into shape. I see this a lot. I've seen so many runners with that mentality. They state they can't believe how poorly they ran, so they itch to get out and hit the street. That is not healthy. And finally, similar to guilt-based training, some runners have an unhealthy view of their body image, and they'll pound the miles to get the weight off, or the weight they think they need to get off. It's a form of eating disorder. Sure, running is a healthy way to weight maintenance, but like anything else, taken too far, is unhealthy. If you're already lean and light, and you state you've got to run because you feel fat—that will catch up with you eventually.

WHAT EXACTLY IS OVER TRAINING?

It's training to the point where the gains no longer outweigh the losses. We know the obvious signs already: Loss of performance, minor injuries (or worse), frequent illness, feeling run down, lack of motivation to train... Just to name a few. Most runners also understand that overtraining is simply over-pounding, which can lead to injury, and they watch for those symptoms, but where most runners go wrong is they don't understand CORTISOL.

CORTISOL

Cortisol is a natural hormone that gets released by the adrenal glands. It gets released any time we are stressed. When you get overstressed, due to overtraining or training plus stress in other areas of your life, it will wreak havoc on your system. Cortisol is catabolic, meaning its goal is to break down. The body's job is to restore order. It does this naturally. Too much cortisol released into your system delays healing and growth. It puts your body into a state of constant muscle breakdown, and suppresses your immune system. It also has an effect on the central nervous system. That's why it's deceptive... Just because you don't feel aches and pains doesn't mean all is well. If you're overtraining, this sneaky hormone (which is your body's way of protecting itself) will come right in and shut you down. Look at cortisol the same way you look at lactic acid—another byproduct whose job is to keep you in check. We know in racing that we get anaerobic too early and feel the burn—what happens next? Yup—we slow down. Think of cortisol as the sneaky cousin. The signs won't be as clear, but once they're there, they'll shut you down, and for far longer than lactic acid will!

HOW TO AVOID IT?

You have to start with having the right motivation to train. I can't tell you how not to run out of guilt or fear. The only thing I can tell you about that is it will catch up with you. You have to train or run for higher purposes. Simply loving to run is a higher purpose—chances are you're not killing yourself when you're doing that. With training, if you're going to run long, you can't run hard, and if you're going to run hard, you can't run long. It's that simple. The biggest mistake runners make is running in NO MAN'S LAND almost every run! This leads to quick overtraining. Easy days need to be EASY! And 90% of your training needs to be aerobic/easy. Did you know that even a "short" 5K is 90% aerobic and 10% anaerobic? Yet few runners actually train their aerobic system. Next month, I'm going into the values of true aerobic training to reinforce this article, but this article is about overtraining, so I can't go into too much

depth on that. But I can say that most runners have no idea just how easy “easy” needs to be. When I’ve had great success with very fast runners and/or triathletes in coaching them, many people want to know the secret plan. They think that I push, push, push. Ask those I coach—It’s mostly the opposite. My biggest thing is getting them to run slow enough on easy days. My goal for coaching is to let the talent of the runner take over and not let them overtrain. This is the hardest job for me, the coach. It’s tough getting people to slow down. But after a few races it gets easier, because they see how fast they are when going in fresh. So, I mostly work as the governor of the engine. My mantra is be patient and save it for race day.

How easy is easy? A GPS is a great tool, and I use one all the time. But there has been a down side to their coming of age, and that is that people are getting away from heart rate monitors. HRM is the only true way to know if you are training in the correct zones. You simply can’t just use pace. Pace does not take into account your body’s accumulative fatigue, and it does not take into account conditions such as heat, wind, or terrain. Pace alone won’t cut it. **If you simply go by pace or “feel”, you’re allowing your body to train you versus you training your body.** And even coming within 5 beats or so of your anaerobic threshold is very comfortable, and is too hard for easy days. Being truly aerobic can be measured in 2 ways: Being at 80% of your maximum heart rate or less (which is 75% of VO₂ max), or even better, by being at 95% of your anaerobic threshold or less. Measuring AT is even more accurate than percent heart rate, because your fitness levels dictate what percentage of max heart rate you use. But both---using the true biofeedback of the body---are great. The key with that is you have to know your outright numbers. The math formulas to come up with max heart rate are not accurate, and the formulas derived for AT are not accurate either. In the old days, you would have to go to a hospital or university to get VO₂/AT testing done, but now many companies are doing VO₂ testing, so if you are serious about staying healthy and making improvements, it’s worth getting the numbers. The tests are a lot more inexpensive than those fancy GPS’s!

Next month, I’ll talk a lot more about the values of aerobic training. Let’s just say, for now, that it’s not worth killing yourself in training. One, it doesn’t work, and two, it’s about the journey, not the destination.