

February, 2003

OVERTRAINING

Sometimes, I get to the end of the month, and I'm having a hard time thinking of a good topic for the Sandpiper. I wonder if I should go back over quality versus quantity, or interval training, or what? And then I have a moment when something becomes very obvious and it just begs for me to talk about. It came to me when it shouldn't have – right at mile 10 or so in the Hops Marathon... **OVERTRAINING!**

What is overtraining? Does it really exist? Is it just athletes being lazy? These are questions that I get often. Overtraining is very real and is not athletes being lazy. In fact, it's the opposite. It takes a lot of discipline to be just trained versus overtrained.

Overtraining is physical. It is real. The muscles break down when used. Basically, all the soft tissue (muscles, ligaments, tendons) slightly break down following exercise. This is normal. They build back up when you rest. This is the natural way of getting more fit. After the rest, we come back a little stronger. This is normal overload. The problem occurs when our work doesn't equal our rest, so instead of recovering and building back up, we pound the pavement again. This simply puts our muscles in a state of alarm. They quit responding... Have you ever had heavy legs?

Another aspect of overtraining is proper fueling. We get overtrained when we use up all of our glycogen and do not adequately replenish this glycogen. This leaves our muscles in a depleted state. If we train hard day in and day out, we better have a perfect diet to refuel these hungry cells. How many of us can say that we eat just the right amounts of carbs and protein and fat? And remember, even if you do eat a perfect diet and refuel, you still need rest to repair muscle damage.

Finally, there's also the hormonal factor in overtraining. When we push our bodies beyond what we can handle, our bodies send signals to the central nervous system. This creates a response in which neurotransmitters are released, protecting the body from further harm. This is part of the "fight or flight" response. Our bodies simply won't have the energy to train, and we witness our heart rates shooting up far too easily. Go for your "easy" run and witness your heart rate shooting up way beyond normal. This is your body's "fight or flight" response warning you it's time to rest.

I put several people on plans for the Hops Marathon. With each and every one of them, I explained the value of quality training and being perfectly trained – not overdoing it. I explained how it is better to run just three days a week, or four, tops. This way, the muscles can rebuild. I explained the value of cross training versus running every day. I explained the importance of a long easy run on the weekend, but also the importance of not running too long. I explained the value of speed work so fitness can improve. I explained how the increased fitness (anaerobic threshold) will allow them to turn the "throttle" down and hold a comfortable pace for the entire marathon. They all go on the plan. They all followed it to a "T". They all had great races! (Congrats Tammy Tepper, Denise Nisbett, Tara O'Dwyer, Deb and Randy Tillman, and Julie Hill-Warner). Sorry if I offend anybody else who did Hops, but I hope you understand this is part of the story.

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So, what's the point? The point is that I did the opposite. I ran six days per week. I ran way too long on my long days. I ran way too many miles in the week. I didn't have near the race I wanted. The person I trained with mostly, Deb Tillman, did all that I did except when she was taking her active rest days the days after our "core" runs (which I told her to do), I was logging more garbage miles. Again the outcome – She had an awesome race and qualified for Boston in her first attempt, and I'm sitting around writing about overtraining. Get my point? Now I'm no speed demon – never claimed to be – never will be. I love running because it challenges me to be my best physically. But I know I didn't have close to my best race. I calculated a time goal based on my other races. I had a really good idea based on my 30K at Paul deBruyn. I was OVER a minute per mile slower in my 26.2 than my 30K. Why? I was overtrained. I felt it coming on. I knew it was happening. My legs were dead, my other races were sliding, but once in the overtraining rut, the only way out is total rest. If I know this, then why did I do it? I'm as guilty as the next person. The professional in me knows what to do. The athlete in me can be obsessive. Learn from my mistakes.

How do we avoid overtraining? I think the above summed it up. But most importantly, don't feed into the miles game. We get fitter/faster by quality work such as intervals and temp style runs. Miles do not make us faster. We reach a point of no return when we play the miles game. Most publications are now catching on. Ken Cooper (who has always preached quality) has released a study that states that above 30 miles per week, the gain isn't worth the cost. Now, I'm not going to tell anybody to back off the miles they're running. I know people are comfortable at certain levels. And it is different for everybody. But it is a fact that increasing miles does not make you faster, and there is a point when it stops increasing your endurance.

The biggest thing that jumps out in the studies regarding overtraining is frequency. If you rest after runs by doing cross training or total time off the next day, you are doing yourself a huge favor. The other key training point is miles – don't do too many, especially garbage miles (miles for the sake of miles). Speaking of miles, it is always better to clock time, not miles. This way, you are less likely to run more garbage miles. Don't go too long on your long runs. There really isn't an exact number. But you should not be feeling a lot of fatigue on your easy, long days. You should finish this run somewhat fresh – feeling like you could have gone further. Listen to your body. I know I will be going nowhere near three hour runs next time. The other way to help with overtraining is get plenty of rest. Try to get a massage every month or so, and get a chiropractor on your team. They can help you "stay straight" – to ensure recovery. These are recovery modalities, and I find them helpful.

The biggest lesson learned is to give yourself a chance. Smart training focused on raising your fitness levels by doing speed work, doing quality long runs, focusing on stopping before you are tired, and learning and implementing proper nutrition will get you to the finish line. I doubled the miles that my trainees did, and I was the only one of the group to NOT reach my goal. I knew early in the race. My legs felt heavy from the start, and speed bumps looked like hills. I thought, "Uh-oh, goal readjustment time". Don't get me wrong, I do value just finishing a marathon, if that is your best effort. I just believe that to make it a really special day, we should finish it feeling that we did our best. This was not the case for me because I was out of it before the gun went off. Never has "do as I say – not as I do" been more appropriate.