

To improve performance, you have to start by fortifying the mind

by [Frank Horwill](#)

A friend of mine was a patient in a cancer ward and his treatment involved going without food and water for eight weeks. He survived on a drip. During this time he lost three stone in weight. Around him other patients frequently died. It was a depressing period. Asked how he coped with tubes into and out of his stomach and down his throat he, replied: "I start each day by saying "I'm going to enjoy this day" and then I ask myself "Whom can I help today?" This is a good philosophy for all sportspeople to adopt.

Ron Clarke (Australia) 30 years ago broke world records for two miles, three miles and six miles, and 3,000 and 5,000 metres, as well as the distance run in one hour. The 10,000m world record had eluded him many times, and on one of his training runs by the sea he was pondering why this was so when he heard in the distance in a rocky alcove much squealing and splashing. Out of curiosity he ran towards the scene and discovered a group of children lying on their backs in the shallow water and throwing a ball to each other. Then he noticed a row of collapsible wheel chairs. The children were all paralysed. He turned away from the scene and muttered to himself: "What am I bothering about the 10,000m world record for?"

Sporting performance should always be put into perspective. If an Ethiopian athlete during the height of his country's terrible famine were to run into a Red Cross relief camp and exclaim, "I've broken the 5,000 metres world record", there would be little interest unless he was carrying a bag of flour. The word "recreation" literally means recreating our mind and body. Because we can, we should. If we enjoy sport we will enjoy it more if we get better at it. Improving involves the allocation of time. Our lives revolve around the three eights - eight hours work, eight hours sleep, eight hours free time. Some of the free time will be required for taking meals and for travelling to and from work. At the very least we can find one hour a day to practise our sport. When we choose that hour is our prerogative.

Roger Bannister as a medical student at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, chose to use his lunch hour for a 10-minute jog to Paddington track, where he ran 10 X 440yds in about 60 secs with two minutes rest, then he ran back to work. The whole procedure took 48 minutes, leaving him time to eat his lunch. If you want to train for sport you can always fit it in somehow.

Time is precious. Our lease of life is 70 years. We know little of the first and last five years. We are at our physical peak in sport for about five years, although we may compete in one way or another for 25 years. This means that every training session is a precious piece of our time. It is an investment which will pay dividends in the future. The more we invest, the better the return.

Start small and then grow

Training must have a point. It is a journey towards a destination, a fixed point in our minds. The terminus must be both reachable and challenging. It may be to run a mile in under four minutes. What will it take to do this? First of all we have to become familiar with the pace, 59 secs per 400m, not 60 secs per lap which is only 4 mins.03 secs / mile. We can achieve this by taking segments of the distance and running them at the appropriate speed... This may take several weeks, months or even years. We are still travelling towards our destination; it may be long and difficult but we must stick to the route.

Do more of what you dislike

Whatever distance a race is, that distance assumes major, and often exaggerated, proportions in our mind. To a predominantly 400m runner, the 800m event looks like a marathon! We have to conquer that fear of the distance. Roger Bannister did it by running 3 x 1½ miles slower per lap than his intended sub-four minute mile. If the mile seems formidable, it will be less so if we regularly run two miles. We can start cautiously by running eight consecutive laps of the track 10 secs per lap slower than in our target mile, ie, 69 secs/400. We should keep practising this until we get major reductions.

Glen Cunningham (USA), former holder of the world mile record, as a novice was ignorant of training methods. He repeatedly ran the mile distance in training and racing and tried to reduce the time for each race. He got used to the distance all right but he reached a plateau of performance. Then he met a coach who encouraged him to race 880 yds and two miles and then the mile; he also encouraged him to train at these different speeds. He broke the world record within a year.

There are many 800m runners who shun the 1,500m event, and many 1,500m runners who avoid 3000 and 5,000m races. Similarly, they do not entertain running under-distance. Like Cunningham, they stick to one distance and stagnate. They are scared of not looking as good as they do in their main event.

This brings me to a very important maxim for fortifying the mind: whatever you most dislike in training and racing, DO MORE OF IT. Derek Ibbotson disliked sprinting, and consequently he was outsprinted in many races. He decided to spend a winter with his club's sprint group in addition to his normal cross-country training. He became one of the fastest finishers ever in mile races. He also broke the mile record.

Training the will-power

Professor McDougall, a famous writer on psychology some 40 years ago, stated that the seemingly useless practice of getting a box of matches and each day taking them out one by one and arranging them in a line on a table was an exercise that would strengthen will-power. We don't hear much about will-power training in sport. We often hear about "the will to win" but where does this will come from? Are we born with it or can we acquire it? Oscar Wilde summed up the weak-willed aptly when he said: "I can resist everything except temptation". Athletes have to resist certain excessive social behaviour patterns which are accepted as the norm. This is defensive use of the will. Can we go on the offensive? We can - and in doing so improve our performance.

A middle-aged female took up running for the marathon. She had not participated in sport of any kind for 25 years. She was told to run for one minute and each successive day to add a minute. Because she had such a short stride, her leg strength was tested by making her hop 25 metres. She took 22 hops to cover the distance (world-class middle-distance runners can do it in nine). She was told to do hopping exercises every other day. After 100 days this woman was running for 100 minutes and had reduced her total hops to 15. The secret of her success was to start with a very minor challenge and to build on it. Many start too ambitiously and break down, giving the will a severe dent in the process.

To sum up fortifying the mind

1. Start each day with a declaration of intent: "I am going to enjoy this day".
2. You can run; many cannot and will not run. Some have never known what it is like to run. Make the most of it while you can.
3. You can train every day for at least one hour. There is no excuse not to.
4. Train with a goal in mind.
5. The method of achieving this goal must involve rehearsing the activity and aids to that activity.
6. Competition must not only include the specific event but other events which will test endurance and speed.
7. Exercise your will specifically by devoting time daily to the task you dislike most in training - or to a known weakness. Start small and progress.

A competition is a competition; if you have trained diligently and intelligently and done your best, you have succeeded. You are only a failure if you have not done these things.

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