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Learning from mistakes

It is safe to say all athletes are seeking to make their athletic experience better than before. Each athlete may have different aspects of the athletic experience, which we try to make better than before. For some it is to run a personal best time for a given distance. For some it is to run farther than before. For some it is to experience the social interaction of exercising with others. For some it is the opportunity to get away on a solitary run in order to mediate on important questions, such as, the purpose and meaning of life, or why I need a teenager to change the time on my wristwatch. For some it is to experience the beauty of out doors. For some it is to improve our body composition and health status.

Whatever our motive in our efforts to improve our athletic experience there are several questions, which arise.

Do you improve and learn more from mistakes or do you improve and learn more from successes? In you're past life experiences, what were your most powerful learning experiences?

Do you consider mistakes a learning process or do you consider mistakes a failure to avoid and perceive the experience of making a mistake with guilt? Do you acknowledge your mistakes freely? What attitudes and beliefs did you learn in school and from your parents regarding mistakes?

Samuel Smiles said, "We learn wisdom from failure much more than from success".

If mistakes are a good thing, that is, we learn and improve because of mistakes, this leads to an intellectual dilemma.

On the one hand we should seek to have mistakes; because the more mistakes we experience the more we learn. On the other hand mistakes are failures. Failures are things we want to avoid. I do not fully understand this dilemma. This is a question I will ponder on my

solitary runs. Our answer may depend on whether we are optimist or pessimist.

After reflection I believe some of my most memorable learning experiences were associated with mistakes. One small example, in my second attempt to complete a 100-kilo road race, I prepared by practicing imagery and visualization on my training runs. During my long training runs I would visualize running miles 50 to 60 with good running form, while maintaining a good steady pace. Interestingly the mental practice worked well as I ran very strong from mile 50 to 60. Unfortunately I am a metric illiterate; a 100 kilo is 62.2 miles. I fell apart in the last 2.2 miles. I was ill prepared mentally for the last 2.2 miles. I learned from this mistake to practice mental imagery with a complete, thorough and detailed image.

All of us can think of example where we had a memorable learning experience associated with success. Remember the training you did in order to achieve your personal best race time. Most likely, your training involved personal training records in terms of weekly mileage, training intensity and mental preparation.

In order to learn, from our mistakes we need to recognize the mistakes and remember the mistakes. The first step is being honest enough with ourselves in order to admit we made mistakes so that we can learn. The second step is remembering the mistakes. A running log or diary facilitates this process tremendously. It allows us to record our experiences. One of the mistakes I made in my running career was not writing a running log at the beginning of my running career. It was not until I got into college that I started keeping track. The experiences and data from my early running experiences are more of a fog, than clear thoughts.

The two most common mistakes related to athletic performance are training too much or not training enough. Therefore, in order to determine the optimal amount of training we need to record training data. The standard data most runners keep in a training log include either miles run, and time (minutes) running, biking, swimming, race times, and race places. This type of data is most helpful for improving our performance and avoiding injuries.

If, your desire to improve the athletic experience is related to issues other than time and distance I would suggest data related to your motive for running should be recorded. Over the years as, my motives for running have shifted away from improving my race times; I have realized that I

need to be recording different types of data in my running log. I record questions that arise when running. I record answers that appear during the creative moments of a run. Observations, such as, notes about the smells I enjoy on the run such as the smell of a damp forest, honeysuckle blooms, wood fires burning. I record notes about the beautiful scenes that I see running along the James River. I write ideas down for newsletter articles.

A critical step is to take time to reflect, review, and analyze the recordings. A critical step is to occasionally or periodically review training log and assess the mistakes and assess the successes.

For many of us the challenge is to avoid making the same mistakes again and again. Wisdom or experience is what causes us to make new mistakes instead of old mistakes.

Whatever your motivation for running is, your personal experiences and direct observations are a very powerful tool to facilitate your efforts to improve. Writing a log/journal dramatically improves your ability to remember and facilitates self-improvement. Make sure the data you are recording in your training log/journal is consistent with your motives for your running.

As the comic character Dilbert stated "creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes art is knowing which ones to keep".