



## The Long and Short of It – Dale Peterson

### Listen to Your Coach

Every runner has a coach. Some of these coaches carry clip-boards and blow whistles. Some of these coaches wear funny looking shorts, sunglasses and visors. Some try to blend in with the runners themselves in terms of their attire. Some like to be called coach and some would rather be called by their first name.

Many of us had our first formal running experience in junior or senior high-school. My coaches tended to be of the clip-board, whistle, funny shorts and visor variety. In retrospect I realize that some knew more than others but that they all did the best they could with the information they had available subject to the evolution of the sport, and their awareness of or lack thereof in regard to the strengths, weaknesses and particular needs of the runners under their direction.

My junior college coaches seemed to have had not much more information than my prep-school coaches and what they did have was doled out in greater quantity in direct proportion to one's perceived abilities or lack thereof. No wonder I am not very fond of this group.

However, one thing was constant for me and I'd say ninety-five percent of my peers in high-school and junior college – we all *listened* to the coach. If the coach said we were going to practice starts today or if they said we were going to do 20x220 under 28 that is what we did. The five percent who chose not to listen or who openly rebelled quickly found either new coaches or something else to do on spring afternoons.

Good coaches and by that I mean sincere coaches, always have some kind of program in mind in which they are guiding the runners in order for them to reach their potential. Whether the goal is to beat the cross-town rivals in the next dual meet, to make it to the regional competition or simply to shave x-number of seconds or tenths of a second off of a particular time – it is all based on following a program. Adjustments are usually made to this program based on a plethora of factors including but not limited to progress, fatigue, injury, weather and the relative state of the competition etc.

When new to running we typically have few pre-conceived ideas about what constitutes an effective program vs a less effective program and so we tend to listen to our coach. This coach is often but not always someone who has been assigned the duties of coaching us whether through a school or club based program or through some financial arrangement in which the runner or runners pay someone deemed more knowledgeable or experienced to provide them with direction.

However, once we start making even minimal progress as a runner we soon begin to critique even the best coach, advice, or program. The best coaches listen to their runners and while reserving the final say make appropriate adjustments based on the feedback that they are getting whether thru direct communication or thru observation of results in practice or competition.

# The Empire Runner

When you listen to your coach, and weigh it against your own observations and results you may hear things that you might otherwise have missed if you just blindly follow along without thinking.

As we grow and become more seasoned runners we find that besides the classic clip-board and whistle carrying coach there is an almost endless supply of advice and programs available thru magazines, newsletters, the internet and the “buzz” among the running community in general. Ah for the simpler days of waiting for the coach to blow the whistle and bark out some orders!

Knowing what “coach” to listen to becomes more and more challenging especially as differing philosophies are expounded, grow and finally fade only to rise again. Depending on who you listen to and when you will hear that high mileage is the way to go, that if there is no pain there will be no gain or you will hear that less is more, and rest is best. Likewise you will hear that you should try to mimic a particular running form or NOT... you should run “naturally”. Most recently you will hear that running in minimalist shoes is best even though for the past 40 years you were told that you should only run in highly structured “mechanically correct” shoes. People will tell you that intense speed-work sessions are the key to improving your times. Still others will say that having a strong “core” is the key. You will hear equally baffling and contradictory information on nutrition and other topics.

To make things even more confounding, all of your “coaches” will be right at least part of the time depending upon on everything from your age, level of fitness, genetics, time of the year and weather conditions to your mental attitude, time commitment and particular goals.

In particular for the runner who is no longer under the direction of a formal coach and in order to get the maximum return from this confusing mix of information it becomes even more important to *listen*. You must of course continue to listen to your external coach or “coaches” but to truly reach your potential you must learn to listen to your *internal* coach.

The concept is obvious enough to your average adult but may in fact prove challenging to implement.

It may mean designing your own program or modifying one supplied by your external “coaches”. It may mean cutting a workout short when everybody else is going long that day. Conversely you may be the only one left on the track as the sun is going down. You have to be willing to go it alone.

In my experience it is always easier to be the one going long or the one doing the extra repeats than it is to be the one cutting the workout short. But ultimately only YOU, if you have been paying attention to your program, health, results and progress can judge the best course of action.

At times it may be beneficial to put yourself completely in the hands of another or to follow a prescribed program to a T, but at some point your success in reaching your goals and your ultimate happiness as a runner will only be found from within.

Temper your decisions and adjust your program and goals based on all the sources of information available to you but in the end be sure to *listen* to your coach.