

RUN YOUR OWN RACE

Running can become overshadowed by **PRESSURE AND UNHEALTHY** competitiveness. Avoid comparing yourself to others and learn to thrive with these simple tools

WORDS Evie Serventi

Winter 2013: The grass crunched underfoot as we stamped the cold from our legs, blowing heat into our hands, trying to shake off nerves. Two hundred cross country runners huddled at the start-line, ready to go. It was then that I noticed others around me looking calmer, warmer, fitter than I felt. Doubt grew to fear as the previous year's injuries and absent chunks of training came flooding back. Needless to say I felt slow, distracted and miserable as I crossed the finish-line. Looking back, the only consistency I had around my running was negatively comparing myself to others! If I wanted to enjoy running, I had to find another way.

It's not surprising that we compare ourselves to others. More people take up running every day; running is a sport; and sport is competitive. We run with family, friends, our dogs. We run with running clubs, triathlon clubs. In fact one of the key attractions of running is the 'measurement' factor. People run to improve, to progress, to sharpen PBs, to shift the goal posts. People run to lose weight, gain weight,

increase fitness, feel happier, to forge new friendships. Many reasons, yet all of them come with the double-edged sword of comparing yourself to others.

"It can be helpful to train with someone else, and aim to be as good as them, but only as long as it's motivating, not demoralising," warns Leanne Spencer, a PT who focuses on recovery and fitness. When you start resenting your running buddies as they shave minutes off their times, then it's time to pay attention and think about what running means to you.

SMELL THE ROSES

The next time you are running with your group, enjoying parkrun or training hard for your marathon, make a conscious effort to take notice of people around you and the spectators – read their encouraging posters and absorb their cheers. When you are out on your daily run, acknowledge passers-by. New research has found that positive visual cues had an effect on endurance runners' perceived effort – in other words, helped runners feel like they could run better and further. This tactic will also help you shift your focus away from 'competing' to 'enjoying' your run.

BE YOUR (OWN) BEST FRIEND

Talk to yourself! It might sound a little crazy, but mantras can help keep you internally focused and can subtly build confidence – it works for Paula Radcliffe. Create a running mantra and make it stick! Keep it short, sharp, and personal – make it relate to your own life. If I had stood at the start-line last winter repeating my mantra: 'never give up', perhaps I wouldn't have started comparing myself to others and instead just enjoyed my own race. Remember, every runner has their own journey, their own story and their own challenges.

PERCENTAGE NOT PACE

Grant Pirie, a 47-year-old marathon runner

from East Sussex, has a simple yet effective way of keeping a balance between healthy competition and enjoying his training. "Rather than measuring my progress by speed or pace, I try to think in terms of percentages – it really helps to keep me grounded and positive. I'll say: 'I feel like I've made a 10 per cent improvement this week', rather than: 'My overall pace has been slow this week'. I also include other aspects of my week when judging my own performance – including travel, how much sleep I've had, the weather conditions, my nutrition. It makes it much easier to enjoy a session with a friend when you keep a realistic perspective on your lifestyle. He might do faster repetitions than me, but I might have run a race the weekend before, or have had an extremely busy week work wise."

LEARNING ABOUT BALANCE

Lucy Batham-Read, who juggled family, a career, a new business and fitness, sustained a stress fracture in her foot a year ago. It was a valuable warning sign which she used to create a new approach to life. "This year I have had to understand balance when it comes to exercise. I am someone who wants to be able to exercise every day even when I am 80, and to do this I need to listen to my body, trust my instinct and stop competing with my 20-year-old self and others around me.

"My wellbeing 'musts' include: acupuncture, yoga, walking, meditation and having the right people in my life," added Lucy. "Good food, enough sleep and understanding and managing stress are part of it, but the biggest factor is knowing myself; knowing my boundaries and learning that my body is unique. With this knowledge comes responsibility to guide it using my intuition."

ACCEPT IT TAKES TIME!

"You've gone out for that first run round the

DIFFERENT WORLDS

Lucy Batham-Read recalls when her best friend suggested they do a half marathon together:

"My best friend was an Olympic athlete and I was your average 29-year-old active mum. Her training included nutritionists, coaches... Mine included running in between looking after a six-month old baby. It did not enter my head that what worked for her might not work for me. I did the half marathon in a more than respectable time but at the end of the race I felt a failure and I hated every minute of it. Why? Because I did not achieve the time I expected and so began my love/hate relationship with running and my own competitiveness."

STRUGGLING? GET A GRIP ON REALITY

Research shows that making choices based on a firm understanding of reality rather than simply being 'positive', is referred to as 'grounded hope' and is a more effective approach to overcoming a challenge. The researchers acknowledge positivity as part of effective therapy, but say it's also vital to express your thoughts and feelings – whatever those may be. As quoted by authors Feldman and Kravetz (2014) in *Psychology Today*, "Over two decades of research show that people who are more hopeful in this way tend to make more progress on their goals than people who are less hopeful; they also are on average less depressed, less anxious, and report that their life is more meaningful."

It's time to stop comparing yourself to other runners, and focus on positive things

block, progressed up to your first mile and then first 5k, but perhaps you struggle to get any further? Or maybe you just can't get in under 10-minute miles? The beauty of running is that (pretty much) anyone can do it. It can be done anywhere in the world and it's free. But like anything, it takes time to progress," explains Leanne.

"Frustration is an energy-sapping emotion, and at the end of the day, we are all restricted by time, family and social commitments, work and other factors, so it's really about making the most of the time you do have and making sure your training is about getting as much value-for-time as possible. Try not to constantly compare yourself to others. Even if you're a world champion, there's always someone faster and stronger than you. There is a lot you can do to try to improve your distances or your times though. The adage 'if you want something different, do

something different' is very true."

PRO-ACTIVE WHEN INJURED

"Injuries occur frequently and can happen at any time in your running career, irrespective of how proficient or experienced you may be. Coping with the injury, and learning to be patient sitting at home while your running buddy heads out for their endorphin fix, can be challenging," concedes Leanne. "Yet usually with an injury, there's a lot more that you can do than you can't do.

"Focusing on what you can do means that you can stay active (vital for morale and mental wellbeing), actively helping yourself recover, while maintaining some degree of your training regime. If using the gym in the running club is also a fundamental part of your social life, it doesn't need to stop just because you're injured." ●



ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Leanne Spencer is the founder of Bodyshot Personal Training Ltd, based in South London

which has three brands. Bodyshot PT; Bodyshot Baby; and Recovery Fitness: personal training, yoga and specialist nutritional advice for men and women suffering from stress, anxiety or depression. www.bodyshot-pt.co.uk



Lucy Batham-Read set up Loveursoul in 2008 as part of her journey back to good health. The business provides products and services around creating a healthy lifestyle in body and mind. Lucy has a knack of helping people find the right coach, therapist or 'next step' towards good health, which in her own words help you go from "survive to thrive."

www.loveursoul.co.uk