

GARY DUDNEY

The Mindful Runner



FINDING YOUR INNER FOCUS

MEYER & MEYER SPORT

The Mindful Runner

For my wingman

And special thanks to Hermes and Sebastian for their steadfast support and monumentally helpful insights

The contents of this book were carefully researched. However, all information is supplied without liability. Neither the author nor the publisher will be liable for possible disadvantages or damages resulting from this book.

GARY DUDNEY

The Mindful Runner



FINDING YOUR INNER FOCUS

Meyer & Meyer Sport

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

The Mindful Runner

Maidenhead: Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd., 2018

ISBN: 9781782558026

All rights reserved, especially the right to copy and distribute, including translation rights. No part of this work may be produced—including by photocopy, microfilm or any other means—processed, stored electronically, copied or distributed in any form whatsoever without the written permission of the publisher.

© 2018 by Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd.

Aachen, Auckland, Beirut, Cairo, Cape Town, Dubai, Högendorf, Hong Kong, Indianapolis, Manila, New Delhi, Singapore, Sydney, Tehran, Vienna

 Member of the World Sports Publishers' Association (WSPA), www.w-s-p-a.org

ISBN: 9781782558026

Email: info@m-m-sports.com

www.m-m-sports.com

Contents

Prologue	The Warm-Up.....	6
Chapter 1	Running Sucks.....	15
Chapter 2	The Pride of Wichita.....	26
Chapter 3	To Have and Have Not.....	39
Chapter 4	Tempo! Tempo!	54
Chapter 5	Night on Topatopa Bluff.....	67
Chapter 6	To the Stars Through Difficulty.....	83
Chapter 7	Jogging Club.....	93
Chapter 8	No Man Is an Island	109
Chapter 9	My Heart Left Me in San Francisco	126
Chapter 10	On the Edge of the Western World	137
Chapter 11	The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.....	150
Chapter 12	Yo, I Know You're In There	164
Chapter 13	Be Your Dog	174
Chapter 14	Prairie Runner.....	190
Chapter 15	Once Upon a Time.....	204
Chapter 16	Twenty-Four Hours of Attitude Adjustment.....	217
Epilogue	The Cool-Down.....	232

Prologue

The Warm-Up

Tanzanian marathoner Juma Ikangaa was a top competitor in the 1980s. Slight in stature at 5'3" and weighing only 117 pounds, he was a lion at heart and a fierce frontrunner. Other runners knew a marathon with Ikangaa was never going to include an easy first-half pace. Ikangaa would charge off the line at what commentators called a suicidal pace and then wait for his chance to surge so long and hard that the race would be over when he was done.

He came to prominence after winning world-class marathons in Melbourne, Tokyo, Fukuoka, and Beijing. He had three consecutive second-place finishes at the Boston Marathon (1988-1990) before winning the New York City Marathon in 1989 against a field that included Olympic champion Gelindo Bordin of Italy, the then world record holder Belayneh Densimo of Ethiopia, and the previous year's NYC Marathon winner Steve Jones of Wales.



The author fully engaging with the mental side of running

© Rob Mann

It was a crowning victory for the diminutive artillery major from Africa's Great Rift Valley. His time of 2:08:01 was the new course record, putting to bed the controversy over Alberto Salazar's 2:08:13 record, which had been under a cloud since officials determined that the course Salazar ran was 120 yards short of being a full marathon.

The sight of Juma Ikangaa at his best, the small man out in front of his taller competitors leading the most competitive marathons in the world, was incredibly inspiring. But beyond this image, perhaps just as memorable, was something Ikangaa said, "The will to win means nothing without the will to prepare."

This quote captures so much about the mind's role in the act of running. Ikangaa's will to win evokes what runners come to understand the first time they really push the pace or run themselves

The Mindful Runner

beyond their comfort zone. Running suddenly becomes a mental exercise, a test of will power, a measure of mental toughness. The real drama when you're running is going on in your head, not in your quads or your calves, as dramatically painful as they may be.

In a similar vein, Steve Prefontaine, the outspoken Oregon miler who was also a notorious take-no-prisoners frontrunner, famously said, "Most people run a race to see who is fastest. I run a race to see who has the most guts." When Prefontaine says *guts*, he is referring to a mental ability, the ability to marshal the courage, determination, will power, acceptance of pain, and extreme toughness of mind that it takes to run at one's ultimate capability.

It is telling that both runners invoke the mind when they comment on finding success as a runner. They do not make reference to miles run per week, interval speed drills, running technique, workout routines, or VO2 max levels. In fact, Ikangaa broadens the notion of the mental side of running being a key to a runner's success by talking about the will to prepare. Again the role of the mind is brought front and center. The preparation to run your best, as physical as it certainly is, is still dependent on the mental dimension. Can you summon the will to get out of bed in the dark for your first run of the day? Can you force yourself to keep running after fatigue sets in? Can you remain patient through long runs? Do you have the determination to hold your pace as the miles pile up and the training hours go by?

It's All Mental, Isn't It?

The old joke is that running is fifty percent physical and ninety percent mental. Runners recognize the truth behind the bad

math in this joke; they don't need any convincing. When I tell people about my first book on running, *The Tao of Running: Your Journey to Mindful and Passionate Running*, I usually say something like, "It's about the mental side of running." More often than not, runners hear that and immediately smile with recognition. "It's all mental, isn't it?" they often say.

What they are referring to, I believe, is the unmistakable mental struggle that takes place when the running gets really hard. You are in the final mile of your attempt to set a new 10K personal record. You hit the final hill just hanging on to the pace you need to succeed. You are giving it everything you've got. Every muscle and fiber in your body is signaling you to slow down and stop but you don't. You will yourself to continue. Your mental toughness wins out. You push on, you hold your pace, you even speed up. It's clearly mind over matter.

There will be a lot in this book about that difficult moment of truth and how to cultivate a mindset that will keep you running when the chips are down and when it seems most hopeless. But we are going to explore a much broader notion of how the mind plays into running, starting from the premise that the mental aspect of running is operating all the time when you run. You may not be focused on what is going on in your head when you're just breezing down the sidewalk, but your mental activity or your mindset while you're running is always of interest.

Mindfulness

A point I make at great length in *The Tao of Running* is that running is a natural fit with mindfulness. In fact, I believe many

The Mindful Runner

runners fall into a natural state of mindfulness without even realizing it. Mindfulness can be simply defined as a focused attention on the present with acceptance. By focusing exclusively on the activity you are engaged in, you experience all the impressions, sensations, thoughts, and feelings about that activity very directly and without interference from thoughts and worries about some problem you had earlier in the day or some concern about tomorrow. You try and engage just with the present.

The acceptance part of mindfulness involves those thoughts and concerns that occur to you about the past or future while you are attempting to stay focused on the present. You want to acknowledge such thoughts but not become attached to them. Instead of going off on some emotional tangent about the issue you are having with a co-worker, for example, you let that thought recede while focusing back on what you are doing. You accept the thought, but then you move on.

Temporarily freed from worries about the past and future, you get off the emotional rollercoaster of careening from one problem to the next that often characterizes our thinking, and instead, you experience the present moment with an attention and a depth that is quite uncommon. The result is a reduction in stress, a greater appreciation of whatever you happen to be doing, and an increased sense of satisfaction and well-being.

Now apply that whole dynamic to running. Running provides a wonderfully rich supply of sensations and impressions to focus on in the present. You have the whole world around you to see, hear, smell, and feel, and you have all the sensations from your body generated by the act of running. Stray thoughts intruding on your mind concerning a work problem will stick out to you like a sore thumb. You can easily trap that thought and move beyond it.

The more you stay in the present, just absorbing all the wonderful sensations of running, the more your running becomes a break from the rest of your difficult day.

Similarly there is a lot of shared real estate among running, mindfulness, and meditation. They all operate by pulling you away from your day-to-day stresses and having you focus on the here and now in some fashion. A classic meditation technique, for instance, is to focus on your breathing. You can do exactly that when you're running or practicing mindfulness. All three practices result in similar outcomes: less stress, more appreciation for life, and more self-satisfaction and self-esteem.

All that is certainly good in regards to the positive effects of running on your life, but let's cast an even wider net with this discussion of running and the mind. If you're reading this book, chances are you've already discovered that running seems to do a lot more for you than just provide a little exercise. Running provides a framework for the very satisfying act of setting and reaching goals. There is a social dimension to running. People meet and become fast friends through running. Running promotes health. It is practically a fountain of youth for seniors. In many cases, running transforms people's lives, helping them break addictions, overcome depression, or recover from other severe health or emotional problems.

Quality of Life

Let's consider two more quotes here. The first is attributed to Kara Goucher, a two-time Olympian in long-distance events, a silver medalist in the World Championships at 10,000 meters, and a top

The Mindful Runner

finisher at the Boston Marathon. She said, “That’s the thing about running: your greatest runs are rarely measured by racing success. They are moments in time when running allows you to see how wonderful your life is.” Well-known physician and running philosopher, George Sheehan, said, “The obsession with running is really an obsession with the potential for more and more life.” In these quotes, our running sages seem to take the benefits of running to a whole new level. They link running with the quality of life itself.

The point is that when running is properly experienced, fully explored, and deeply appreciated, it can lead you to fully embrace your life and live it to its fullest. At least, that’s what I think.

The Mindful Runner is intended to suggest a lot of ways for you to think about your running. Ideally you will learn, among other things, how to enjoy running; see the humor in difficult situations; focus on the journey of running and not the end result; deal with the painful aspects of running; get to any finish line anywhere, anytime, no matter how difficult the race; and deal with injuries and setbacks.

This book stands by itself, but if you want an even fuller discussion of the mind and running, you should read my first book on running as well, *The Tao of Running*. Both books rely heavily on stories to illustrate the points I want to make about the mental side of running. I hope the stories are fun to read in and of themselves. As you read about running situations that I describe, think about yourself in similar situations. Think about what would be going through your mind, what attitude you would have, and what mental strategies you would use to cope with a particular situation. Essentially, my stories are jumping off points for your

own thinking about running; they're pathways to finding your own inner focus. I want you to become a mindful runner yourself, not just in the sense of practicing mindfulness as you run, but in the sense of being aware of the role that the mind plays whenever you are running.

My first book, *The Tao of Running*, explores a lot of connections between running and different philosophies such as secular Buddhism, existentialism, Taoism, and the like as well as looking at very practical aspects of the mind's role in running, such as, staying positive, setting and achieving goals, staying relaxed, and using mindfulness to deal with pain. Many of the stories in the book come from the world of trail running and ultrarunning.

The Mindful Runner draws more from the world of marathoning, cross-country running, racing shorter distances (such as 5Ks and 10Ks), and running in general. The focus is more on just exactly how the mind works while you are running and what mindsets and mental strategies are going to help you get through a run successfully and get the most out of every run.

So I welcome you to this world of mindful running. Here are a couple of other quotes that I think will apply as you read through this book. One is by Eleanor Roosevelt: "You must do the thing you think you cannot do." Finally a quote from somebody named Unknown, "Any idiot can run, but it takes a special kind of idiot to run a marathon."

The Mindful Runner



Become a mindful runner and be aware of the role the mind plays whenever you run.

Chapter 1

Running Sucks

Really, unless you're a cheetah or a Siberian husky or a gazelle, your first attempts at serious running are probably not going to go well. Running will reward you in the end, but chances are you'll struggle to get there. You will get sore. Pains will pop up out of nowhere. It will feel like you're not making any progress.

Don't be discouraged. A rough start is common. But help is on the way. Let's discuss a simple mental strategy that you can apply to your running anytime and anywhere. You will use it to defend yourself against debilitating negative thinking. It's nothing new. Quite the contrary, it's one of the ancient heavenly virtues, but we are going to repurpose it specifically for running.

It is *patience*.

One definition I found of patience includes this phrase, "... building a sense of peaceful stability and harmony rather than

conflict, hostility, and antagonism.” There’s a running goal if I ever heard one. Who would not want to run with “peaceful stability and harmony” and not feel “conflict, hostility, and antagonism”? I only wish that when I first began running I had experienced even a little peaceful stability and harmony. Instead, my initial foray into serious running was characterized by a singular lack of patience, and as a result, I concluded that running sucks.

Cross-Country Fizzle

My first day attending Southeast High School in Wichita, Kansas, in August of 1967 was crazy scary. It was a huge school, much bigger than any school I had ever been to before. Right off the bat, I couldn’t find my first class and ended up in the principal’s office waiting for a secretary to help me out. The hallways turned into a riot every time we changed classes. Some of the seniors looked like grown up men and women. They were monsters. I did, however, manage to find a notice about a meeting after school for those interested in the cross-country team.

I knew zip about cross country. I hadn’t done any serious running in my life, but I felt like I needed to go out for a sport. There was the matter of earning a letter jacket, which I assumed was necessary in order to be cool and popular. Only two sports were available in the fall, cross country and football. I briefly contemplated football. I was pretty fast and sure handed. I thought I might make a good receiver, but I was not big. Then I imagined somebody who was big flattening me and that effectively put me off the football idea.

Running, on the other hand, didn’t seem like such a big stretch. Who couldn’t run? How hard could it be? Plus I felt like I was an



In search of peaceful stability and harmony

okay athlete. I'd played some Little League baseball and had done pretty well. And recently in my last year of junior high school, the school had held an intramural competition in several minor sports. Badminton was one of them, which I'd played a lot as a kid. I signed up and marched through the brackets like I was mowing down wheat. A star basketball player faced me in the finals. He was a big target so my strategy was to whack the shuttlecock into his chest over and over. The basketball coach was laughing, watching me, a little guy, thoroughly confound his best player. I figured I could expect the same kind of success at cross country.

There were about ten or fifteen of us at the meeting after school eyeing each other nervously. We waited for a while. The door opened and in walked Charlton Heston. Okay, it wasn't Charlton Heston. It was Charles "Chuck" Hatter, but he was a dead ringer for the actor. Coach Hatter was tall and had the same sandy

The Mindful Runner

hair, prominent forehead, strong jaw, nose and eyes as Charlton Heston. The resemblance was really uncanny. I checked my memory on this by pulling up some photos of Charlton Heston online. Sure enough, one of them was a perfect match with a picture of Coach Hatter in my Southeast High yearbook.

Coach Hatter also had the same commanding presence as Heston, which he used to good effect as both a coach (cross country and swimming/diving) and as a chemistry teacher. When Ben Hur told you to swim extra laps, you swam them. When Ben Hur told you to balance a chemical equation, you balanced it...no ifs, ands, or buts.

For someone recruiting new members to his cross-country team, Coach Hatter had an odd approach. “Cross country is not a fun sport” was the first thing he said. “Unless,” he went on, “you think it’s fun to run up and down hills on a golf course.” That was practically the whole message. It was going to be tough and you weren’t going to like it. He was discouraging us from going out for the team.

Undeterred, I showed up the next day after school for the first practice. We put on our regular gym clothes and got our first look at the juniors and seniors who were on the team. They were dressed in sweatsuits with school logos. They were subdued, quiet, and unsmiling. No one was snapping towels and horsing around. It was not a big party.

Coach Hatter arrived with a clipboard and recorded everyone’s name. Then he told us to follow the juniors and seniors. We would be running over to College Hill Park. I started at this news. College Hill Park was a long way off. It was something like two miles away!

We left at an easy jog and followed an ingenious route through the back streets of Wichita that crossed as few major roads as possible and kept grass under our feet most of the way. The team veterans stuck to a reasonable pace so I managed to keep up with the knot of sophomores running at the back. By the time we reached College Hill, it was the longest continuous stretch of running I had ever done in my life. I congratulated myself that I had made it through my first cross-country workout.

Coach Hatter climbed out of his car as we arrived. I was expecting some kind of acknowledgement of our achievement and then maybe instructions to walk back to the school or board a waiting bus that would take us back. Instead, he pointed to a path that followed the edge of the park, pulled out a stopwatch, and told us to stay on the path “all the way around.”

“Ready?” he said. “Go!” This time the team vets shot off the mark and were gone in an instant. It was clear we were supposed to run the mile loop around the park hard. I wasn’t halfway around before the fun meter on this running thing had pegged out completely. I entered a state of agony. My legs were like cement. I had a side stitch that seemed to be splitting me in half. My lungs ached and oxygen seemed nowhere to be found. My head was bent sideways from the strain. When we finished the loop, I collapsed on the grass with most of the rest of the sophomores.

“Next loop in two minutes,” Hatter said, looking at the stopwatch, his calm manner contrasting sharply with the panicked uproar coursing through my head. “Go!” he said.

We went around three more times with only short rests between each loop. I made it, but the last lap was hardly more than a

The Mindful Runner

trudge. The workout ended with a two mile “cool-down” run back to the school.

When I got home, I collapsed immediately on the couch. “What’s wrong?” my mother asked.

“Cross country,” I said.

“Dinner is almost ready.”

“I’m going to bed.”

The next morning I woke up and experienced something akin to what Gregor Samsa must have felt in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* when he woke up and found he had been turned into a giant cockroach. My compliant, responsive, comfortable body had become an alien thing. I could barely sit up. My legs were stiff as boards. They were sore to the touch. The slightest movement caused intense, burning pain. I clanked toward the bathroom in a sort of Frankenstein parody. Later, I was stopped cold at the top of the steps when I realized I needed a strategy for getting downstairs.

As I ate breakfast and contemplated day two at my new school, I was sure that I was through with cross country. Of course, as the day went on, and moving around had the effect of restoring me back to something resembling a functioning human, I had second thoughts. There was nothing good about running that was compelling me to rethink my decision, but there was something very bad about having to face up to Charlton Hesston and tell him I was quitting. Plus there were the other runners. I didn’t want to look like a wuss.

The wuss argument had won out by the end of the day and I returned myself into Coach Hatter's hands for a second practice. He responded by introducing us to something I had never heard of before: interval training. At first I was delighted to learn we weren't running all the way back to the park but would instead be working out on the track right at the school. No long runs to and from the park, no mile loops around the park. How hard could this be?

We did quarter mile repeats—that is, one lap of the track run at race pace followed by a half lap rest/walk—followed immediately by another lap at race pace, and then the rest/walk again. We did eight cycles of the quarter mile repeats. Then we graduated to half mile repeats.

Returning to the starting point of each repeat after the rest/walk was mind-blowing. I was sure I was finished, couldn't run another step, yet I'd launch myself into the next interval, come back up to speed, and then inhabit that horrible space that was me while I clung to my pace and watched the track slowly turn from curve to straightaway and back to curve. The last couple of repeats at each distance were pure torture. Total mileage for that second day of practice turned out to be just as much as the day before, only it was run at a much higher average pace. I trudged home late that afternoon feeling as awful as I could ever remember feeling.

Looking back now on my cross-country experience, I can see that physically it was going to be a hard slog no matter what kind of athletic background I had. You can't just jump into that kind of difficult running program and not struggle at first. But mentally I was not prepared at all. I had zero strategies for keeping negative

thinking at bay and knowing how to deal with the discomfort that hard running creates.

Bring Patience to Mind

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, running doesn't feel that great at first and many people quickly become discouraged. Even if in other respects you're in pretty good shape, you start running and it feels like your whole body is in rebellion, like I felt in my first trips around College Hill Park. There is a process that everybody goes through of having your body adjust to the demands of running. This process takes time. You feel the aches and pains and jump to the conclusion that you are not cut out for running, that you have weak knees or ankles. But if you haven't been running regularly for about six to eight weeks, your body hasn't had time to adjust. You really haven't experienced what it is like to run as a more efficient runner.

This is where a mindset characterized by patience comes in.

Patience is required initially to get out the door every day or two for several weeks even though the benefits of running and any signs of progress may be lacking. I went back to running once after a very long break when I was in graduate school at the University of Kansas. It was the dead of winter and the only reasonable place to run was on an indoor track in the campus's enormous fieldhouse.

Every other evening for three weeks I went there and I'd run exactly two miles, which was sixteen laps of the track. At the

end of the two miles I would be utterly spent. I couldn't run another step to save my life. I remember sitting with my back propped against the wall after my workout and watching these two old professors circling the track over and over. They had been running when I got there, ran all through my workout, and now were running still as I prepared to leave. What was their secret, I wondered. It felt to me like I would never get past the two-mile mark.

But the very next time I went to run, my first workout of week four, I got to the two-mile mark and much to my surprise, I felt absolutely fine. I kept going and ran another two miles, sixteen more laps, before I finally stopped. I actually could have gone farther. A little patience in sticking with my program had paid off.

Patience is going to apply to many areas of your running. Long runs, for example, require patience. You want to avoid probably the biggest mistake runners make when they strike out on a long trail run, a half-marathon, or a marathon, to name a few examples, which is going out too fast. After training hard for an event, perhaps for months, the last thing you feel like doing is starting out slowly, but keeping to a moderate, sustainable pace at the beginning, even though you may feel like firing off like a bottle rocket, is the right thing to do.

Patience is required later in a run once you've burned through your readily usable stores of energy and start feeling tired, sore, and weak. A typical response is to speed up and "get it over with," but unless you're near the finish, this doesn't work. Relaxing, telling yourself to be patient, and accepting whatever you are feeling as normal and just part of the process of running will better keep you on pace.