

# Well - Tara Parker-Pope on Health

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## Training Insights From Star Athletes

By *GINA KOLATA*

Of course elite athletes are naturally gifted. And of course they train hard and may have a phalanx of support staff - coaches, nutritionists, psychologists.

But they often have something else that gives them an edge: an insight, or even an epiphany, that vaults them from the middle of the pack to the podium.

I asked several star athletes about the single realization that made the difference for them. While every athlete's tale is intensely personal, it turns out there are some common themes.

### Stay Focused

Like many distance swimmers who spend endless hours in the pool, Natalie Coughlin, 30, used to daydream as she swam laps. She'd been a competitive swimmer for almost her entire life, and this was the way she - and many others - managed the boredom of practice.

But when she was in college, she realized that daydreaming was only a way to get in the miles; it was not allowing her to reach her potential. So she started to concentrate every moment of practice on what she was doing, staying focused and thinking about her technique.

"That's when I really started improving," she said. "The more I did it, the more success I had."

In addition to her many victories, Ms. Coughlin won five medals in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, including a gold medal in the 100-meter backstroke.

### Manage Your 'Energy Pie'

In 1988, Steve Spence, then a 25-year-old self-coached distance runner, was admitted into the United States Long Distance Runner Olympic Development Program. It meant visiting David Martin, a physiologist at Georgia State University, several times a year for a battery of tests to measure Mr. Spence's progress and to assess his diet.

During dinner at Dr. Martin's favorite Chinese restaurant, he gave Mr. Spence some advice.

"There are always going to be runners who are faster than you," he said. "There will always be runners more talented than you and runners who seem to be training harder than you. The key to beating them is to train harder and to learn how to most efficiently manage your energy pie."

Energy pie? All the things that take time and energy - a job, hobbies, family, friends, and of course athletic training. "There is only so much room in the pie," said Mr. Spence.

Dr. Martin's advice was "a lecture on limiting distractions," he added. "If I wanted to get to the next level, to be competitive on the world scene, I had to make running a priority." So he quit graduate school and made running his profession. "I realized this is what I am doing for my job."

It paid off. He came in third in the 1991 marathon world championships in Tokyo. He made the 1992 Olympic marathon team, coming in 12th in the race. Now he is head cross-country coach and assistant track coach at Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania. And he tells his teams to manage their energy pies.

### **Structure Your Training**

Meredith Kessler was a natural athlete. In high school, she played field hockey and lacrosse. She was on the track team and the swimming team. She went to Syracuse University on a field hockey scholarship.

Then she began racing in Ironman triathlons, which require athletes to swim 2.4 miles, cycle 112 miles and then run a marathon (26.2 miles). Ms. Kessler loved it, but she was not winning any races. The former sports star was now in the middle of the pack.

But she also was working 60 hours a week at a San Francisco investment bank and trying to spend time with her husband and friends. Finally, six years ago, she asked Matt Dixon, a coach, if he could make her a better triathlete.

One thing that turned out to be crucial was to understand the principles of training. When she was coaching herself, Ms. Kessler did whatever she felt like, with no particular plan in mind. Mr. Dixon taught her that every workout has a purpose. One might focus on endurance, another on speed. And others, just as important, are for recovery.

"I had not won an Ironman until he put me on that structure," said Ms. Kessler, 34. "That's when I started winning."

Another crucial change was to quit her job so she could devote herself to training. It took several years - she left banking only in April 2011 - but it made a huge difference. Now a professional athlete, with sponsors, she has won four Ironman championships and three 70.3 mile championships.

Ms. Kessler's parents were mystified when she quit her job. She reminded them that they had always told her that it did not matter if she won. What mattered was that she did her best. She left the bank, she said, "to do my best."

### **Take Risks**

Helen Goodroad began competing as a figure skater when she was in fourth grade. Her dream was to be in the Olympics. She was athletic and graceful, but she did not really look like a figure skater. Ms. Goodroad grew to be 5 feet 11 inches.

"I was probably twice the size of any competitor," she said. "I had to have custom-made skates starting when I was 10 years old."

One day, when Helen was 17, a coach asked her to try a workout on an ergometer, a rowing machine. She was a natural - her power was phenomenal.

"He told me, 'You could get a rowing scholarship to any school. You could go to the Olympics,' " said Ms. Goodroad. But that would mean giving up her dream, abandoning the sport she had devoted her life to and plunging into the unknown.

She decided to take the chance.

It was hard and she was terrified, but she was recruited to row at Brown. In 1993, Ms. Goodroad was invited to train with the junior national team. Three years later, she made the under-23 national team, which won a world championship. (She rowed under her maiden name, Betancourt.)

It is so easy to stay in your comfort zone, Ms. Goodroad said. "But then you can get stale. You don't go anywhere." Leaving skating, leaving what she knew and loved, "helped me see that, 'Wow, I could do a whole lot more than I ever thought I could.' "

Until this academic year, when she had a baby, Ms. Goodroad, who is 37, was a rowing coach at Princeton. She still runs to stay fit and plans to return to coaching.

### **The Other Guy Is Hurting Too**

In 2006, when Brian Sell was racing in the United States Half Marathon Championships in Houston, he had a realization.

"I was neck-and-neck with two or three other guys with two miles to go," he said. He started to doubt himself. What was he doing, struggling to keep up with men whose race times were better than his?

Suddenly, it came to him: Those other guys must be hurting as much as he was, or else they would not be staying with him - they would be pulling away.

"I made up my mind then to hang on, no matter what happened or how I was feeling," said Mr. Sell. "Sure enough, in about half a mile, one guy dropped out and then another. I went on to win by 15 seconds or so, and every race since then, if a withering surge was thrown in, I made every effort to hang on to the guy surging."

Mr. Sell made the 2008 Olympic marathon team and competed in the Beijing Olympics, where he came in 22nd. Now 33 years old, he is working as a scientist at Lancaster Laboratories in Pennsylvania.

*This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: January 15, 2013***

*An earlier version of this post misstated the year in which Steve Spence competed in the Olympic marathon, finishing 12th. It was 1992, not 2004. It also misidentified the institution at which he is a coach. It is Shippensburg University, not Shippensburg College. Also, the article misstated the circumstances under which Helen Goodroad attended Brown. She was recruited to row at the university, she did not receive a rowing scholarship. And because of an editing error, the article misstated the length of some races that Meredith Kessler has won. They are 70.3 mile championships, not 70.3 kilometers.*