**Consistency and Variety in Training.**

**1.Consistency :** What is the single most important factor in improving your athletic performance Increased mileage ? More speed work ? Weight training ? Plyometrics ? Hill-work ? More tempo runs ? More interval training ? More “threshold pace” repetitions ( cruise intervals ) ? Increased flexibility ? More core work ? Better nutrition ? More rest and recovery ?

While all of the above are important , and are all part of the “jig-saw” which results in enhanced performance , none of them is the single most important factor . So what is ? The answer is CONSISTENCY . If you train consistently , you  **will** improve . Simple ? Well……….. maybe .

So, how do you ensure that you will achieve consistency in training ? Consistency results from three main factors :

(a) Good health .

(b) Freedom from injury .

(c) Will-power / Dedication .

Sporadic training may be due to a lack of any one or a number of the above factors. But one stark fact is quite obvious : athletes who are sporadic trainers will not make any real progress in their sport . The next question then is how to attain the three factors outlined above. **(a) Good health**  may be partly genetic but it is also the result of taking certain measures or precautions which should be known and observed by every athlete. A good ,balanced diet is essential for good health. Supplements\* , in the form of multi-vitamins and iron , are a worthwhile precaution but are not essential . Observing the basic rules after racing/training are essential . These include a proper cool-down , a warm shower ( not hot ) , the ingestion of some form of carbohydrate and a small amount of protein within 30 minutes of finishing exercise, and wrapping up well afterwards – especially on cold ,wet Winter evenings .Athletes must be aware of the  **“ 90 minute window”** that exists after exercise when athletes are particularly susceptible to colds and infections due to the fact that their immune systems have been weakened by the stress of hard training. **Adequate rest and sleep** are also important in ensuring good health. Athletes should ,of course , have regular blood checks paying particular attention to their haemoglobin and ferritin counts. **(b ) Freedom from injury** cannot be guaranteed when training hard but ,again , certain precautions can be taken which will decrease the risk of injury . These include the wearing of appropriate training shoes i.e. shoes which suit your particular gait ( pronator /supinator ,etc. ) and which are not worn down and have not lost their cushioning properties. Obviously wearing light road racing shoes on a long training run is not appropriate ; wearing spikes in certain conditions may be asking for trouble. ( e.g. on hard, frosty ground ) . Don’t skimp on good training shoes : as the late Noel Carroll used to say *“ Good training shoes are not cheap ; but they’re a hell of a lot cheaper than the fees of* *orthopaedic surgeons”.*  Don’t train on worn-down shoes : the cushioning properties of most shoes are practically worn outafter approx.1000km. ( 625 miles ). Prevention is better than cure may be an old cliché but it is still true. Any changes in training, such as an increase in quantity or quality , should only be undertaken after a consultation with your coach and should be introduced in small increments. Be careful when switching from one training surface to another : for example, if you have been doing most of your winter training on grass or parkland, then the transition to track training must be undertaken very gradually. If you switch abruptly from a soft surface to a harder one you can expect problems to ensue , especially to the Achilles tendon. Don’t run on dangerous surfaces e.g. icy footpaths. It is all too easy to slip on ice thereby straining or breaking something. Back in the mid 80s, when both men were at their peak, Dave Taylor brought John Treacy for a run in the foothills of the Dublin mountains. It was in January and the back roads were quite icy in spots. Not long into the run , Treacy announced that he would not continue : “I’m not taking risks with my career”. So he turned back and went home. And don’t let anybody accuse Treacy of being soft ! You don’t win two World Cross titles , an Olympic Silver medal and run a 2:09 marathon if you’re soft . Treacy was a very intelligent man who refused to take foolish risks which could lead to an injury which might possibly side-line him for months. **Regular massage and daily stretching** can help in preventing injury .  **Ice-water baths (** or at least letting cold water run on your legs ) can also help. Inform your coach of any strains or twinges you are experiencing . Don’t try to be ultra macho and attempt to train through it . “Run off the injury” is one of the most inane and dangerous comments one can hear in sport . If it is a genuine injury , you most certainly will not run it off and , in attempting to do so , may do far greater damage . **“A stitch in time saves nine”** is still a very good piece of advice which all athletes should heed . A three day rest , if taken immediately , can save you from weeks or even months of frustration , enforced rest and costly physio bills. Don’t forget the basic, initial response to any suspected injury : **RICE i.e.  *( Rest , Ice, Compression ,Elevation ).*** If ,in spite of these precautions, you still get injured , consult a chartered physiotherapist ( or a **proven** physical therapist ) . Beware of many of the self-styled therapists who have completed no more than a few weekend courses in the subject ! When starting back after injury the motto and guiding principle should be ***Festine lente*** ( hasten slowly ).

**( c ) Willpower or Dedication .** It is very debatable as to whether these qualities can be learned or taught . They are primarily innate but may be developed to some extent . Motivation must come from within . An athlete must be dedicated , strong willed , prepared to make sacrifices and be able to endure a considerable degree of pain . If you really want to do something , you’ll do it . Obstacles in the way ( and they are inevitable ) will be viewed as challenges ,not insurmountable barriers. They will not be used as excuses to opt out or take the easy way. I remember a runner telling his coach that he couldn’t possibly do the training programme that the coach had given him . He was working by day and attending college by night ,so how could he possibly do all this training as well ? The coach just looked at him and said “There are still 24 hours in the day” . The lesson the athlete had to learn was that good time management is essential. Sometimes you simply have to adopt the motto ***“ Just do It ”\*.*** On a cold ,dark winter’s morning you may not want to do that early run . Don’t think about it ! If you do , you probably won’t run . So, just get into your gear and go . \* *( Runners were using this motto long before Nike adopted it ).*

A runner must be prepared to take  ***“ The Road Less Travelled”.*** If you are the type of person who consistently wants to indulge in the so-called “good life” (Clubbing , drinking , etc.) ,you are in the wrong sport . In many team sports , especially at amateur level in the junior and intermediate grades, you can train just one or two nights per week and play a match at the weekend - and still make a contribution to the team . You can also “hide” in a team and, indeed, a team can carry a couple of “passengers” .But in running, especially on the track , there is no hiding place . In order to be even a decent club runner you must train at least six days per week. That level of commitment may get you to the club levels of 1:55, 4:00, 15:00. But even then there are no guarantees. I often remember Laro Byrne telling his young charges “ You can’t burn the candle at both ends”. Of course nobody expects a young man ( or woman ) to live like a monk but you must be prepared to sacrifice quite a lot of the hectic social life which others take for granted . **Because if you are not utterly consistent in training , you can forget about making genuine progress.** Many younger athletes , who may have had quite a lot of success at under-age or schools’ level, may also be in for a rude awakening if they think that the same level of commitment which brought them success at that level will still be good enough at senior level. There is an old joke told about the pig and the chicken and their respective contributions to your breakfast of bacon and eggs. The pig is committed ; the chicken is merely involved . The analogy is clear : when it comes to your level of commitment to running , are you committed or are you merely involved ? Too many athletes are merely “involved” ; that’s fine as far as it goes but those athletes are very unrealistic if they expect to reach the top level on such a half-hearted level of commitment.

Jack Daniels says there are FOUR types of runners : 1.Those who have ability and the motivation to develop and use that ability .They become the successful athletes. 2.Those who do have the ability but lack the motivation to make the necessary sacrifices and who are not consistent in their training . He calls those “the coach frustraters” . It just may be possible to convert a Type 2 individual into a Type 1 ( but don’t bet on it ). 3.Those who don’t have much ability but have great motivation to succeed . Daniels calls this group “The Self Frustraters”. Athletes should be realistic in their expectations. As Dirty Harry used to say “ A man ought to know his limitations” ! 4. Those who lack ability and who have no motivation . These will give up the sport very quickly . (Of course , these people may be Type 1 individuals in other areas of life and endeavour and may have tremendous talents elsewhere .)

**\* Supplements .** We know that the Irish Sports Council recommends that athletes should completely avoid all supplements . The reason for this “blanket ban ” type of advice is obvious. We have all heard of athletes who claim that they took supplements in all innocence only to discover, after failing a drugs test , that these supplements were tainted by other substances on the banned list . Most doctors and sports scientists say the same thing : if you are eating a balanced diet , there is no need for supplements . All you are doing is creating very expensive urine ! Laro Byrne always said to his young protégés : “ Eat what your mother puts in front of you and you’ll be fine”.

That is all very well **but** Laro’s advice now seems to belong to a different era .Mothers stayed at home then and cooked for theirfamilies . Families ate meals together . But nowadays that all belongs to a long gone age . People eat “on the run” ( sometimes literally ). People have adopted the American habit of “grazing” rather than sitting down to a home -cooked meal. Young people living away from home for the first time ( especially , perhaps, young men living in bed-sitters ) may be inclined to exist on pre-packaged meals , tin food or take-aways . In such cases, it is highly unlikely that they are getting adequate nutrition , especially if they are engaged in hard , physical training. Consequently, supplements may be necessary if only as a precautionary measure . The late Jack Sweeney ( “ the father f Irish coaching” ) always recommended vitamin and mineral supplements to us raw U.C.D students ,up from the country , over 45 years ago. It must be emphasised that what Jack was recommending was the type of supplement one could, and still can ,buy over the counter in a pharmacist’s . And I agree with him . But I cannot emphasise strongly enough that athletes should avoid like the plague the type of “supplements” you can freely find in some gyms , some health shops and body-building establishments. Some of these can carry a very high risk of being tainted with a banned substance.

So what are the “innocent” supplements which can be taken without fear of breaking any rule or cheating ? The first type is Multivitamins such as Vivioptal or Pharmaton .It is better to take vitamins in compound form ; taking a certain vitamin in isolation can lead to an imbalance . ( Avoid any versions of those which contain ginseng ,which is on the banned list ) Second are iron supplements, such as Ferrograd C . ( This is particularly important in the case of female athletes ,for obvious reasons ).**Iron should not be take continuously : take a month’s course , then lay off for a month . Athletes should also ensure that they are not suffering from haemochromatosis ( an unfortunately common condition among Irish males ) which is excess iron in the blood .Taking an iron supplement while suffering from this condition would be potentially lethal. If you have any doubt about this , you should visit your doctor and ask him for a blood test.**  Third, is Brewer’s Yeast ( a rich source of Vitamin B, which is essential for good energy levels.) Wheat germ ,another rich source of Vitamin B , can be sprinkled on your cereal . Wheat germ oil can be obtained in tablet form from your pharmacist . It boosts your immune system and is considered to be a preventative measure against cardiovascular disease and cancer .

**Variety in Training.** Runners can , like everybody else , get into a rut at times . Peter Coe used to say that there wasn’t much difference between a rut and a grave ! So a bit of variety can help when you’re training every day or perhaps more than once a day every day. So let’s look at different aspects of how to make training more varied ,thereby keeping it fresh and interesting : 1.**Variety of Venue :** you can train from home , from school , from college ,from work or , of course, from your club. Many elite international ,full-time athletes like to travel to different parts of the world to train at different times of the year. Warm weather training is now *de rigeur* for most elite performers. Our own James Nolan always travelled to South Africa in January in order to avoid the worst of the Irish winter and get some quality sessions done in warm sunshine. Distance runners will try to spend regular spells at altitude in order to increase the haemoglobin levels in their blood . At this time of year, Jayme Rossiter regularly goes to Boulder, Colorado to train at approx.2500m.with his Loughborough team-mates. Other popular resorts are Albuquerque in New Mexico, Mammoth in California and Font Romeu in France. 2.**Variety of Terrain :**  A list of different terrains would include grass, dirt trails , tarmac roads , concrete paths, hills ,tracks ( indoor and out ). Training on different surfaces can also provide novelty to your workouts . Grass, of course , is highly recommended ( especially for younger athletes ) as it is softer and kinder on the legs and can be a measure of injury prevention. Dirt trails are similar and often wind their way through beautiful countryside and stunning scenery which provide an inspirational environment to the distance runner .Concrete paths should be avoided as far as possible . Tarmac paths are somewhat kinder and , if you’re putting in the kind of training necessary to run a marathon , training on tarmac is almost inevitable and ,indeed, recommended as you will have to race on predominantly tarmac surfaces. Training on tracks ( especially very hard mondo tracks ) should be done sparingly . Some of the greatest track runners did most of their workouts away from the track and sessions such as fartlek , cruise intervals and tempo runs should generally be done away from the track . **Variety of Training Partners .** Runners should train with people who are : (a) of their own standard (b) with people who are faster than them (c) with people who are slower than them. (d) with sprinters . It makes a lot of sense for athletes to train predominantly with others of the same standard . If they are of a like minded competitive ,ambitious frame of mind then they support each other and push each other to greater heights. But ,occasionally , it is good for athletes to train with people who are better than them ,who have ran faster than them and who have more big-time experience than they have. They will be challenged by such superior performers ; they can learn a lot from them and can be inspired to emulate what those elite individuals have already achieved . Thirdly , and this may seem odd , it is wise occasionally to train with runners who are slower than you are . But on your recovery days ,when you may be doing a long ,slow “therapy” run , it is wise to run with people who are moving slowly . This will ensure that you are not tempted to run too hard on a day when  **the whole emphasis should be on recovery .** (d) If you are a serious middle -distance runner ( especially an 800m.specialist ) it is highly recommended to do the occasional speed-endurance session with a group of sprinters. Mixing with these speed merchants can develop and hone the type of swiftness you will need in the closing stages of a high class 800 or 1500m. But a word of warning : there is a danger on both sides of “showing off” ,of becoming overly competitive ,of each side trying to prove that their particular speciality is superior . Even Roger Bannister fell prey to this temptation ! ( cf. the article on ***Racing )* Variety of Training Methods :** Obviously this topic has already been comprehensively covered in the earlier articles on Training at the start of this series. Just to re-cap, we can summarise these methodologies briefly : L.S.D. ( Long , Slow/Steady, Distance ) ; Fartlek; Tempo runs ; Long Reps.; Cruise Intervals ; Hill-work ; Interval training ; Pyramid workouts ; “Up-and-down the clock” sessions; Time trials ; Plyometrics ; Weight- training; Sprint-drills; speed-endurance work; Race Simulation . “Therapy” sessions ,while an athlete is recovering from injury, would involve aqua running, swimming , cycling , cross-training, etc. Long Reps. might be 4- 8 X 1 mile; 3-4 X 2.5 miles; 10-12 X 1Km.; 6 X 2Km., etc. Shorter reps. could be sessions such as 6 X 800 or 8 X 600. Classic Interval workouts might incorporate 24 X 200 or 20 X 400. Pyramids might be 1600,1200,800,600,400,200 . ( a favourite Arkansas workout in the John McDonnell era ). “Up-and-Down the Clock” workouts could see athletes run 200,300,400,600,800,800,600,400,300, 200. ( Very tough ! ) Race Simulation : for 1500m . runners trying to break 4 minutes this might look like this : 1200 in 3:15 ; 30 seconds rest ; 300 in 45. For 800m. runners ( hoping to run close to 1:50 ) it might go as follows : 600 in 1:24 ; 30 seconds rest; 200 in 26-27. **Variety in Time of Training :**  While regularity is important , it is also important to vary the time of training , especially at weekends . Getting out early on Saturday mornings and getting your workout completed before Noon , means you have the rest of the day free to relax or indulge in other interests . During the Winter , it also enables you to avail of some daylight and ( hopefully ) sunlight to top up on those very important Vitamin D levels . You should also occasionally try to train at the same time as you know your race will be held . Our body clocks are subject to circadian rhythms and it’s important to train the body to experience maximal , or close to maximal ,physical exertion at the same time as your important competition will be held . This is vitally important in the case of the marathon : most City marathons start quite early ( 9 a.m. being commonplace ) so if you have never trained at this hour , you may feel very sluggish in the race as your body simply is not accustomed to exerting itself at that hour of the morning. **Variety of Clothes/Shoes : A**thletes should ensure to have clean , fresh gear . Clean clothes and clean shoes can give a psychological boost to a runner who is training hard . You need to have at least two pairs of training shoes : if you are training twice a day , it feels much better to slip into a fresh pair of shoes for the evening run rather than the same pair as you wore in the morning . Whenever I see a runner pulling a mud-covered pair of spikes out of his kit-bag before a race , I always feel that he is not serious about his sport . It denotes a lack of preparation and an absence of attention to detail . **Variety of Weather :** The late Noel Carroll often reminded his listeners that “there is no such a thing as bad weather – only weak men”. While this does denote a rather macho generalisation, it is largely true . It is possible to train in almost all sorts of weather – provided you take sensible precautions . The only sort of weather that runners should be very wary of is **fog .**  While runners nowadays don’t have to contend with the foul, polluted air which characterised the 70s and 80s before smokeless fuel was made obligatory by legislation , ( those of us of a certain age remember coming back to the Club after a 15 or 17 mile training run at night and spending several minutes spitting black mucus into the toilets ! ) , nevertheless it is still not healthy to run in a fog as it infiltrates the lungs and can cause chest infections due to the fact that it may contain environmental toxins. Of course, athletes should not train at all if suffering from a viral illness as it can enter the valves of the heart resulting in serious cardiac conditions such as myocarditis. This is an inflammation of the heart muscle and almost inevitably leads to heart failure .It is believed that up to 20 % of all sudden deaths in young adults are due to myocarditis. Young athletes can have a rather cavalier attitude to their health : it is clichéd to say that young people think they are immortal , but it is still true . In a much earlier article on training,( “When the Running stops ,the Training doesn’t” ) it was pointed out that athletes should ensure to do a proper cool-down after training , have a warm or lukewarm shower and then wrap up well . I still see young athletes cycling or walking home after training on Winter nights with their hair damp or even wet . They are asking for trouble !

Of course , athletes must also be very careful if training or racing in heat . Marathon runners are keenly aware of the perils of competing in heat but every distance runner should also be aware of the precautions to be taken when racing ( or training ) in high temperatures. Proper hydration is the key : one still sees athletes turning up for sessions without water . And while we may not have to cope with really high temperatures here in Ireland very often , athletes may still get dehydrated as a result of hard training .Even slight dehydration will result in a significant reduction in the level of performance . Sports drinks ( containing minerals and electrolytes ) can ensure that the athlete’s levels in these essential properties remain topped up. Athletes should sip regularly from their water bottles while doing a workout . Don’t wait until you  **feel** thirsty, by then you are already dehydrated.\*

\* The whole subject of nutrition and hydration will be discussed in a future article.