**The Coach / Athlete Relationship.**

**Part 1 : What is it ?**

Steve Ovett’s coach, Harry Wilson ,once said that the coach/athlete relationship is the closest relationship, outside of marriage, that any two people can have . “In fact” ,he went on, “it’s a lot like marriage, with the usual rows ,disagreements and conflicts !”. I’m not quite sure whether he was speaking tongue in cheek or not : his comment was probably slightly facetious while at the same time containing a large element of truth. I think, however, that most coaches would argue that a coach should remain somewhat more detached from his/her charges: a coach is there to teach and to help , not necessarily to be a “VBF”, although it is almost inevitable that a friendship should develop- at least when things are going well ! But a degree of detachment, a certain “distance” is also necessary; otherwise it may be difficult for the coach to remain objective when judgement calls are required. And he must never allow emotion to cloud his judgement.

Many people have tried to define the coach/athlete relationship : they have compared it to a doctor/patient or a teacher/pupil or a supervisor/worker relationship - among many other analogies. The coach may indeed become a friend and a confidant to the athlete; the coach may have to act almost like a father figure at times and will have to use either a “stick or carrot approach”( or both ) depending on the attitude and character of the athlete. Their relationship will also inevitably change over time: from having to tell the young athlete how to do practically everything, the coach later becomes a sort of “consultant” , a “sounding board” to the experienced, international athlete, a person who will simply review the plans of the athlete who will continue to “run things by” his expert mentor.

**What is coaching ?**

The aforementioned Harry Wilson also defined coaching as simply “ Being there”. Harry obviously believed in succinct, pithy answers ( he may have been responding to a questionnaire ),but there is more to that short definition than may ,at first, meet the eye. He is suggesting that it is almost impossible to properly coach an athlete unless the coach meets and monitors the athlete on a very regular basis. I don’t know what he would think of all the coaches nowadays who “ coach” their charges by e-mail. (Or text or Facebook or Whatsapp ,etc., etc.). Joe Doonan, Caitríona McKiernan’s coach , often referred to what he called “ the coaching eye”. By this he meant that a good coach, like a good horse trainer, could tell a lot just by looking at an athlete : his form, his demeanour, his body language, etc. And, of course, he needed to be present to be able to do this. Good horse trainers can tell when their thoroughbreds are even slightly “off”, when something is not quite right; likewise for coaches. Jerry Kiernan has a rather similar view : for instance, he rarely tells his athletes how many reps. he wants them to do or at what pace . He simply observes them closely and knows from their reactions whether they have enough done or not . He does not stick slavishly to any pre-ordained plan or schedule : he may want an athlete to run 16 X 400 (say) but if he concludes from the form of the runner that he is struggling to complete that many , Jerry will halt the session after only 8 or 9. “ No point in flogging a dead horse” is an old saying in coaching but, if the coach is not present to make a judgement call, the dedicated athlete is likely to continue as he doesn’t want to appear “soft”. Athletes are very often harder on themselves than coaches are, as they believe, erroneously, that More is Better and Harder/Faster is superior to Restrained. We can be our own harshest critics and our own hardest taskmasters; this is particularly true of highly motivated , dedicated athletes. A coach, dealing with such an athlete, may spend quite a lot of the time harnessing and restraining him in order to ensure that the athlete does not self-destruct. This can be quite difficult at times and,indeed, the coach himself may have reservations about curbing the natural enthusiasm of a young athlete.

One can have misgivings about “holding back” a gifted, young athlete but, if the long-term welfare and success of the athlete is paramount, then such restraint is necessary. Being a multi-award winner and a national champion at under age level is of dubious value if the result is burn out by the age of twenty.

Personally , I believe that coaching is the prudent use of experience, expert knowledge and learning to help athletes achieve their potential. It is the passing on of lessons learned ( perhaps the hard way! ) , the sharing of knowledge ( gleaned from personal experience, coaching seminars, books, pamphlets and observation) with less experienced athletes, with the sole intention of helping them to develop all the natural talent with which they have been endowed, while at the same time helping them to develop as people . Many readers will remember the scene in the film **“ Without Limits**” where Bill Bowerman asks Prefontaine ***“ Pre, what do you think coaches actually do***?” He goes on to explain that a coach is there to actually educate the athlete on how to run and how to race. This often means getting the runner to use his head as well as his legs in a race : getting him to be brave but not foolish at the start ( i.e. not sprinting off like a “ scalded cat” or “bat out of hell” ) , learning pace judgement, learning when to move and when to hold back, how to recognise fake moves by his opponents ,how to recognise whether his rivals are under pressure or not, when to start to kick ,etc., etc. Jerry Kiernan is adamant that a coach should always put the interests of the athlete first .And, of course, he is right. But does this always happen in practice? Sadly, the answer quite clearly is No. Very often, the demands of club and/or school seem to trump what is in the best interests of the athlete. Laro Byrne used to say that “ young athletes are very vulnerable” and that “their willingness to please leaves them open to being exploited”. Young athletes, in particular, do not want to let down their coach/school/club and this generosity of spirit can see them competing, even when partly sick or injured. Some people are highly critical of the American collegiate system, claiming that it “burns out” young talent. But perhaps we should examine our consciences in this country too . We may pay lip service to the ideal that it is more important to have the athlete competing well when he is in his mid-twenties , but do we always practise what we preach ? The worst abuse of the coach’s role is perpetrated by the individual who puts his own ego ahead of the interests of the athlete. Some coaches ( and indeed parents ) try to live vicariously through their young charges, desperately attempting to achieve through their protégé the success which eluded themselves in their own careers. As Steve Magness says “the purpose ( of coaching ) is to make our runners fast ….not stroke our own egos”. **Art or Science ?** It is one of the oldest questions in sport : is coaching an art or a science ? One of the first text books I had to read as a student teacher was entitled “ Teaching : an Art or a Science ?”. The conclusion, even back then was, of course, that it was both . And the same is true of coaching. Unfortunately, we often find that in the world of running ,the science and the art (or practical side) are often at loggerheads. The scientists tend to laugh at the coaches for being too “old school” and for not keeping up to speed with the latest findings in their research studies. The coaches ,on the other hand, ridicule the scientists for having no idea of how things work in the real world of competitive athletics and mock some of the apparently far-fetched theories which emanate from the labs. Of course , the best coaches and sports scientists are those who understand both sides of the coin. Instead of both factions working independently of each other, how much better it would be if both parties co-operated for the good of the athletes . Understanding how we run and how the body adapts to training allows for the development of better methods of coaching and training. With the advances in Sport Science, coaching has become more scientific and we now have sound, scientific principles which explain why certain types of training are more effective than others. Without knowledge of these principles, coaches may simply get stuck in a pattern of following others; they may rigidly adhere to the type of training which they themselves did as competitive runners or they may copy the workouts of other coaches or successful athletes , assuming that because it worked for them then it must work for all. On the other hand,of course, Sport Scientists do not necessarily make good coaches and there is still no substitute for the Art which some coaches bring to their task. Lydiard did not have a degree in Sport Science but he still remains, probably, the greatest distance coach that ever lived . ( Even Dr. Jack Daniels Ph.D. refers to Lydiard as “the Master”.) When delivering the Level 4 Coaching Course , Dr. Liam Hennessy Ph.D., always paid us the compliment of saying, after he had delivered a very erudite lecture,“ But what do you guys think? You are the people with the coaching experience”. So, how can the two be reconciled ? Steve Magness , in his book ***The Science of Running*** , claims that “knowing the science opens up the door for the coach to be an artist”. The coach learns “ to utilise the natural responses of the human body to solve problems in ways that the traditional model would never allow”. Some of the greatest coaches in history certainly integrated science and art in their training methodologies .For example , the great Hungarian coach, Mihaly Igloi, used his knowledge of muscle fibres to theorise that if runners changed their running patterns from what he called “a short swing” to a “ long swing” they would switch the muscle recruitment pattern and thus delay fatigue, if ever so slightly. Salazar is said to have “tweaked” Mo Farah’s form to ensure that he did not overstride. So coaches need to “keep up to speed” on the latest developments in training methodologies, sport science, etc. As the old Latin maxim says “ *Tempora mutantur , nos et mutamur in illis*” : times change and we must change with them. Of course , we should not be swayed by every tide nor should we embrace every new “philosophy” that comes along , just because it is new. The great Arkansas College coach, John McDonnell \*, was once asked why he did not vary his training programmes from year to year.He replied “ Because they work”. In other words , if it’s not broken , don’t fix it ! *\* I hope readers haven’t forgotten that John was, of course, a Clonliffe man.* But the coach must beware of trying to appear more learned than he actually is ! Einstein once said that the task of mathematicians is to make complex things simple, not vice-versa. Similarly, good coaches take complex ideas and make them simple while bad coaches, who want to appear very sophisticated, take concepts and ideas and make them more complex. A coach should know the complexities of sport science, but he should break them down into simpler and easier to use models. Concepts need to be simple and easy to understand in order to be relevant and usable. Of course, athletes quickly “cop on” as to whether the coach actually knows what he’s doing or not !

**Styles of Coaching :** Individuals can differ quite significantly in the manner in which they coach their athletes . Some are very “hands-on” ( perhaps too much so ? ) while others prefer to be more detached . Some coaches are very loud, standing on the side of the track shouting and screaming at their charges.( Do athletes or footballers actually hear any of the “advice” which is being shouted at them ? Very doubtful- although ,in certain surveys, a considerable number of athletes have said that they can filter out all shouts except those from their coaches. Harry Redknapp said that it was a waste of time and energy for coaches/managers to stand on the touchline during matches shouting instructions; he claimed that the players did not hear the instructions and did not understand the hand signals .) Personally , I think that shouting and bellowing do more harm than good, putting even more pressure on the athletes. We have heard of the coaches/managers ( in other sports ) who pound the dressing room tables and break hurleys on the doors. I have always believed that such behaviour is a cover-up for lack of knowledge: what a team or individual needs is calm, clear tactical or technical instructions on how to improve performance not a hysterical display of histrionics. As Peter Coe said “ The heart may pound but the brain must remain ice-cold”. This advice applies equally to coaches as to athletes. Or as Alberto Salazar commented : “Runners are not helmet-banging footballers: what runners require are calm, clear tactical instructions”. The former Arsenal footballer, Nigel Winterburn, says that in the four years he played for Arsene Wenger “ never once did Wenger raise his voice, let alone lose his temper. Even if things were going wrong on the pitch, he never shouted at anybody : he just talked about how to rectify the situation”. Remember , the coach’s disposition may have an impact ( for good or ill ) on the athlete . If the coach is too hyped-up or nervous, this can have a knock-on effect on the athlete . Emotional pep talks on the night before a race may result in getting the adrenaline flowing too early with the result that the athlete goes to bed in a hyped-up state and finds it very difficult to sleep. We often see coaches giving their charges a lengthy list of instructions mere moments before they go to the start line: but the athlete is in such a state of nervousness at that point ,that it is very doubtful if he can understand or assimilate much, if anything, of what is being spoken . Some coaches adopt a “dictatorial style” of coaching : their philosophy is “ I’ll do the thinking and let you do the running”. There are pros and cons to this approach : on the one hand, it spares the athlete from having to worry about planning the season, formulating the workouts or deciding the race tactics. Young or inexperienced athletes need a certain amount of this type of coaching. Some athletes , by their very nature , need a dictator type to keep them focused and to keep them “on the straight and narrow”. Indeed, some psychologists and psychiatrists argue that in life generally we all subconsciously crave dictatorship. In her remarkable book, *“ The Choice*”, Dr. Edith Eger ( a holocaust survivor) says *“most of us want a dictator- albeit a benevolent one -so we can pass the buck , so we can say ‘ You made me do that . It’s not my fault’. ”* More mature, highly motivated and dedicated athletes may prefer a more collegial approach : this style of coaching is more like to occur when coach and athlete have been working together for quite a long time , the athlete has become highly experienced and there now exists a partnership where both discuss and plan training, strategies, tactics etc. together. ***Communication is very important*** – both the style and the substance. Shouting at athletes is largely ineffective; sarcasm and any form of bullying , verbal or emotional, should be completely *verboten*. **If the relationship is based on mutual respect ( as it should be ) there is no room for such behaviour.** What an athlete needs is clear, precise information and unambiguous instructions. As stated earlier, the nature of the coach/athlete relationship changes with the passing of time: in the early days, the coach must issue very clear, concise instructions to young athletes about practically everything: ( type of shoes, length of spikes, whether to wear a tee-shirt under a vest, whether to wear gloves, arm warmers, when/what to eat ,etc., etc.). But as the athlete becomes more experienced he/she should not be still relying totally on the coach for such elementary information. It is often said that ***“ A good coach actually coaches athletes away from him”*** and this does not mean that a coach antagonises or alienates everybody into leaving him (!) but rather that he enables the athlete to be able to think for himself, to be self-reliant, to be able to stand on his own two feet. After all , when the gun goes , the athlete is on his own. Some athletes do seem to think that the coach can run the race for them : they want a clear-cut race plan and if it doesn’t work out they blame the coach. Every athlete should go into a race with a plan but, as Seb Coe said “ In a race ,stay true to your game plan***- but always retain the flexibility to react to the unexpected***”. ( *for more on this, cf. the article on* ***Racing*** *in an earlier Coaching Corner, particularly the way in which Jim Ryun stuck too rigidly to a race plan in the 1968 Olympic 1500m.final ).* The manner in which a coach communicates also depends on the personality of the athlete : he may have to be very sensitive ( and even gentle ) in dealing with some while he may be more robust with others. Again, as Coe said ***“ A good coach needs to know more about the psychology of the person they’re coaching than the technicalities of the event”*** . We have all known coaches whose technical knowledge may not have been great , but they were able to “get inside an athlete’s head”, they knew how to motivate and inspire their charges and bring out the best in them. Percy Cerutty was not considered to have great technical knowledge but he was an inspiring speaker. Indeed, I still remember the first time I read his book : I was so motivated that I wanted to rush out and do a 20 mile run or charge down to Dollymount and attack the nearest sand dune ! Another question that arises in relation to communication is this : just how blunt or honest should a coach be when advising an athlete – especially a young athlete ? While “honesty is the best policy”, I sometimes wonder should ruthless honesty be employed when listening to the hopes and aspirations of a young, aspirant athlete. I often listened to young athletes claim that they would be competing in the next Olympics ( or the games after the next ). I never had the heart to ask them first, had they any idea of the standards involved and second, had they even the vaguest concept of the training ,dedication and sacrifices requred. Listening to their lovely ,idealistic enthusiasm , I was never too sure whether to laugh or cry. I would never destroy the hopes and dreams of a young person , but sometimes their aspirations may have to be tempered by a cold shot of realism. Laro Byrne regularly reminded us that “ from small acorns mighty oak trees grow” and, consequently, one has to be careful not to utterly dash the dreams of the young athlete even when they appear unrealistic. *(More about communication in Part 2 : What the Coach Looks for in the Athlete ).* It may be somewhat different when dealing with the adult, mature athlete.Dr. Bernard Donne firmly believed in ruthless honesty when dealing with senior athletes : I recall bringing Mark Kenneally into the Anatomy department of Trinity College some years ago to be tested in the lab. After the tests were completed , Dr. Donne gave a stark analysis to Mark : “ You will not be running in the Olympic 5000m.” But when I brought Mark in again a year or so later, Dr. Dunne had much better news. After once again performing a Lactate Threshold and VO2 max. test on him , “ Mark” he said, “you have the potential to run a 2:07 marathon”. Mark ,as we know did run the Olympic marathon in London and ,while he may not have ran quite that fast ( yet ! ) we hope that he will do so before he eventually retires . Another anecdote which illustrates ruthless honesty is one concerning Brother John Dooley . Most people know Br. John nowadays as a great coach\* and a marvellous mentor to practically all the young Irish athletes who go to the USA on scholarship. But John was an excellent athlete himself in his prime , indeed he was the National Senior 1500m. champion in 1972. While studying in UCD, he was also teaching by day and attending lectures at night. One day he approached his coach , the late Jack Sweeney, who had just given him a very demanding training programme. John reasonably pointed out that his extremely busy work and study commitments made it almost impossible for him to fulfil the requirements of such an unforgiving programme. He got no sympathy : Jack just looked hard at him and said “ There’s still 24 hours in the day”. John often looked back in later life and laughed at this episode but he always admitted that Jack was right : time management is vitally important and that an organised athlete will make time for his training if he really wants to do it. *\* John is best remembered for coaching the great Mark Carroll to European Junior 500m. Gold in 1990 and European Senior 5000m. bronze in 1998. He was also, of course , the Coach to the Irish Under 23 Cross Country team that won Gold in the European Championships in 2010.*

**Professional Approach :** As we know the word “amateur” means “lover”; an amateur sportsperson was one who played a game for the love of it without looking for any monetary reward. Unfortunately, with the passing of time, the word has taken on a pejorative meaning and now it is used to denote something that is shoddy or lacking in quality. I still like to believe that a person can be an amateur in monetary status but be a “professional” in terms of performance. Our top athletes, the ones who make it to Olympic level, while amateurs, have to be utterly “professional” in their lifestyles and approach to training and competition. Similarly, coaches need to be “professional” in their approach. Reading an article recently about young Irish footballers who go to England and sign professional contracts with clubs over there, I was surprised to hear that many of them found it difficult to comply with the professional standards which were demanded of them. Some of these “demands” were as simple as being on time for training, having clean gear, sticking to the dietary recommendations as prescribed by the club’s nutritionists, generally abstaining from smoking and alcohol , doing some supplementary training such as stretching, drills, etc. I would have thought that any serious sportsperson, professional or amateur, would comply with these simple requirements without having to be ordered to do so ! But I also believe that coaches need to give a good example to their athletes . We ,too , need to be on time ,to have our prep. done, to keep ourselves informed of the latest developments in training, in sport science, sport psychology, etc. In his 27 years as manager of Manchester United, Alex Ferguson was always the first to arrive at the training ground ( usually at 7 a.m. ). His captain for most of that time , Roy Keane , is often quoted in relation to the importance of preparation “ Fail to prepare, prepare to fail.” Little things are important. An athlete once asked me “ How do you decide on what sort of session each group should do ?”. A very pertinent question . My reply was “ I think about it”. In case that sounded a little curt , I then went on to explain that it depends on a number of factors :the age, the ability and level of fitness of the particular athlete or group of athletes; the time of the year/season ; proximity to the next race or length of time elapsed since the last one; the event for which the athlete(s) was/were preparing ( obviously a workout for an 800m. group would differ significantly from a workout for a 5000m. group) ; what is the greatest perceived need of the athlete at that particular juncture : is it development of stamina/endurance , improvement in lactate threshold, speed development ,etc. In other words, a coach does not make up a session on the spur of the moment : “ making it up as one goes along” is never a very good idea! Needless to say, coaches need to keep a record\* of their protégés’ training sessions, race results, lab./medical data, etc. The athlete’s progress ( or lack of it ) must be carefully monitored. It’s not just the athletes who need to keep training diaries ! When giving instructions , the coach should give clear and concise advice. There should never be a laissez-faire approach: athletes need to feel that their training, racing, etc. is organised. Targets should be clearly outlined and mutually agreed. Not a good idea for the coach to have one particular target for a season while the athlete has something completely different ! *\* Technology has made it easier for both athletes and coaches to keep a record of training and to track progress; with apps. like Strava and devices like Garmins, there is no excuse for not maintaining comprehensive records.*  **Overall, the relationship should be based on mutual respect**. Coaches must remember that athletes are not machines : they are human beings with all that being human entails. Young athletes, and not so young, can have all sorts of problems away from their sport . Life puts many demands on us : school or college issues, work or career demands, relationships problems, financial difficulties, family illness or bereavement, etc. all impinge on the ability of an individual to train and race to the best of his/her ability. Any problem, told in confidence by the athlete to the coach, should not be repeated to others without the express permission of the athlete. While a coach may become a counsellor or mentor to an athlete, the coach should beware of attempting to solve all the problems which an athlete may have.

**When the Coach /Athlete Relationship Breaks Down.**

Very few athletes nowadays remain with the same coach throughout their entire careers. In many instances , of course, it is just a case of the underage athlete parting from the person who coached him during the early stages of his career; this is also the usual situation with the secondary-school or college athlete moving on after graduation. But, quite frequently, we also have the situation of the athlete and coach going their separate ways after several years of working together. There can be many reasons for this. The athlete may be dis-satisfied with the progress -or lack of it- that he is making with a particular coach. And , undoubtedly, if the athlete is not satisfied with his coach, then he most certainly should move to another coach. Furthermore, if the athlete has moved onto a level of performance that is beyond the coach’s expertise ,then the coach should be honest enough ( and humble enough) to admit this and pass his protégé on to another coach of greater knowledge and experience. But, as the legendary Michael Johnson said in his autobiography “ **Goldrush**”, *“ Too many athletes are too quick to blame their coach for their lack of progress. Very often, they should instead look into their own hearts and ask themselves if their own lack of commitment and dedication have been the real reasons for their failure to progress”.* Sometimes, the athlete sets himself unrealistic targets and then blames the coach when these are not attained. In this day and age , there is no shortage of gurus who try to convince people that they can achieve anything “just as long as (they) believe”. “Believe and Achieve” is just one of the many catch-phrases peddled by these so-called motivators. Undoubtedly, a person can achieve a lot in any sphere of activity through sheer hard work , self-belief and persistence. But it is an objective fact that , in the realm of sport- and especially in running- our genetic make-up imposes limits on what we can and cannot do. For example , if you are born with a preponderance of slow twitch fibres in your muscles , you can never, ever be another Yousain Bolt no matter how hard you try . And the converse is also true : athletes with predominantly fast twitch fibres will never run a 2:10 marathon. While runners come in all shapes and sizes, I have yet to see a 193 cm. ( 6 ‘ 4’’ ), 89 kg. ( 14 stones ) athlete run a 10,000 in under 28 minutes or under 13:20 for 5000. No amount of psycho babble will change that ! ( Obviously , identifying the particular talent which an athlete has is of prime importance : terrible to think that a great jumper or hurdler might be lost to the sport because he or she was forced to run cross-country in school or in his/her club ! ) But no amount of training or coaching can turn an ordinary footballer into a Messi or an Iniesta. As the old adage said “ You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear” or “ You can’t turn a donkey into a Derby winner”. But many athletes believe that they are better than they actually are and ,as stated before, they set themselves impossibly high targets . Then when they fail to achieve these, it is the easiest thing to blame the coach. Some people feel that every coach/athlete relationship simply has a “ shelf-life” and that when that shelf-life is completed the best thing for both is to move on. An athlete can, simply , become tired of hearing the same voice issuing the same advice and yearns for a fresh approach. And, indeed , it often happens that when an athlete moves to a new coach he obtains a “ bounce” and revels in an improved performance. Unfortunately, however, such a bounce is very often only temporary and then the athlete may look for another change. Some athletes spend their entire careers moving from coach to coach ; such athletes would be well advised to think well about what Michael Johnson said. Unfortunately ,when some coaches and athletes “breakup” there can be a residue of bitterness and recrimination. I always think that this is utterly pointless : we live in a free country ( thankfully ! ) and people are at liberty to make such changes if they so desire. I also think that if there is a feeling of bitterness afterwards , it is a sign that the coach and athlete were a little too close emotionally anyway ; this is why I said I believe there should always be a certain detachment or distance kept between the two even when things were going very successfully. Sometimes , of course, the manner in which the athlete leaves can be a source of ill feeling. If the athlete leaves , without even notifying the coach, there is naturally a feeling of disappointment that the athlete didn’t even have the basic courtesy to say farewell.

**Part 2 : What Coaches look for in an Athlete .**

Most coaches look for the **“The Three Cs”** in an athlete they wish to coach. The three Cs are :

**1. Character. 2. Commitment. 3. Consistency 4. Communication .**

**1. Character :** What is character ? Even though we all have an instinctive idea of what constitutes character , it may be difficult enough to define . When I started coaching first ( about 40 years ago ! ) an older ,more experienced coach said to me : “ The first thing to look for in any athlete is character : if he hasn’t got that , forget about him.” So, what exactly do we mean by “character” ? I suppose you could say that it is the mental and moral qualities peculiar or distinctive to an individual. It is his (or her) personality, make-up, mentality, temperament, psyche, mould, persona. You see it takes a lot of other words to try to define “character”!

We hear the word used quite a lot in Sport . “ Liverpool displayed great character when coming from 0-3 in the Champions’ League Final in 2005 to eventually beat A.C. Milan on penalties a.e.t” or “ Mayo show extraordinary character in coming back year after year in spite of their many defeats in All-Ireland finals” or “ Laase Viren demonstrated his phenomenally strong character when ,after falling in the Olympic 10,000m. final, he picked himself up and went on to win the race AND set a new WR.” or “ Our own Gerry Finnegan proved what magnificent character he has when, despite running with his arm in a cast , he finished 6th.in the National Senior C.C. championships and helped Clonliffe retain their title”. ( Gerry did this in 1977 ). All of these examples indicate that “character” suggests such qualities as courage, bravery, never-say-die spirit. I also think that the word suggests a certain honesty, truth and integrity in the person or individuals on the team. An athlete with character will not “throw in the towel” when the going gets tough. He will not “hide” when confronted by difficulties. He will not simply be “carried” by the rest of the members of his team. And he will not pretend to be giving his all when, in fact, he’s only going through the motions. He is a man who will hold up his hands and admit he was wrong or made a mistake instead of denying it or trying to blame somebody else. **In short, a person with character is a person you would like to have beside you if you “were going into the trenches”.**

**2. Commitment.** If you wish to excel in any sport -but especially distance running- you must make a commitment to give it your best shot for a certain period of time. As Seb Coe said “ Once you’ve decided what you want to achieve, commit yourself fully. There are no half-measures.”

There is an old joke ( often told by Tony Murphy ) about a breakfast composed of ham and eggs which illustrates the difference between being committed and being simply involved . In making such a breakfast possible, the pig is **committed** but the hen is only **involved !** While nobody expects athletes to literally die for their sport ,there are many athletes who are only involved in a superficial way ***–*** “dilettantes” who may be moreinterested in the social side of the sport than in the competitive one. They train only when it suits them , they race if they have nothing more interesting to do ,etc. Athletics/running is way down on their list of priorities. A committed athlete always prioritises his daily training : he will experience “withdrawal symptoms” if he misses a day’s training . ( Scheduled rest days,however, are fine and should be savoured.) He is slightly edgy until he has his daily run completed. Wondering “ Will I train today or not ?”is a question that never enters his mind. “Just do it “ was the dedicated runner’s motto long before Nike borrowed it and made it their own. Adverse weather conditions are no excuse for not training . To quote Noel Carroll again : “ There is no such a thing as bad weather : there’s only weak men”\*. To the committed athlete there is nothing more important in life than his training and racing – except ,of course, his relationship with his spouse or partner and, possibly, his studies and/or career. *\*A word of warning here : there ARE certain conditions which can make training dangerous ; in these conditions , athletes are well advised to rest or engage in some form of indoor training . Such conditions would be freezing fog , heavy snow, icy underfoot conditions. Running in such conditions may do more harm than good as they may lead to illness or injury****. Athletes should never ever train if they have a viral infection.*** *If in doubt , runners should call their coaches ; no athlete can make an objective judgement call for himself ; indeed the dedicated athlete is likely to be very hard on himself and will attempt to train in the most adverse conditions or even when ill. In such cases , the athlete should be guided by the coach or doctor who can stand back and assess the situation in a cool and objective fashion. The coach should err on the side of caution : missing one day can save weeks or even months of inactivity due to illness or injury .* *Remember the story of how John Treacy refused to continue a run with Dave Taylor in the Dublin mountains because the roads were icy – and nobody could ever accuse Treacy of being soft !*

Over the years I have been hugely impressed by the commitment shown by some of the athletes I’ve had the pleasure to coach .Two of these would be Mark Kenneally and Sergiu Ciobanu. In order to train with my group , Mark Kenneally would leave his home in Celbridge at 9.30 a.m. on a Saturday morning and not get home until approx. 4 p.m. I remember dropping him off at Drumcondra train station on one occasion and saying to him “ It’s an awfully long day for you Mark”. His reply was “ I don’t care . I’m prepared to do whatever it takes”. A great example of commitment, dedication AND character. When Sergiu first came to Ireland he was working in a meat factory. The work was back breaking , the hours were long and the conditions were inclement. But I never heard a grumble from Sergiu; and he never complained about the toughness of the training either: if it was 8 X 1 mile or 3 - 4 X 2.5 miles on the menu he just got on with it, even though at times he must have been very tired. Is it any wonder that both of these men reached Olympic or World Championship level ? 3. **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. 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 . “*You cannot burn the candle at both ends”* is an old adage which still holds true . **(b ) Freedom from injury** cannot 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 lost their cushioning properties. Obviously wearing light road racing shoes on a long 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”.* **Prevention is better than cure** may be an old cliché but it is still true. Another obvious precaution is running on softer surfaces such as grass or dirt trails. Some running on roads may be unavoidable ( especially if you’re a marathon runner ) but ,if possible, it should be minimised. The same applies to training on hard tracks, Mondo being one of the hardest. 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**.

**Regular massage and daily stretching** can help in preventing injury .  **Ice-water baths(** or at least letting cold water run on your legs ) and Epsom salt baths can also help. A jog in shallow sea water can be very beneficial : horse trainers regularly walk their thoroughbreds in sea water. Inform your coach of any strains or twinges you are experiencing . Don’t try to be ultra macho and attempt to train through it . Don’t try to “run off an injury” : it 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, h**owever , is 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 ) . *cf an earlier article “ Injuries: Prevention and Cure” on Coaching Corner.*   **( 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.Remember the story of John Dooley 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 do the run . So, just get into your gear and go . 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 hide in the team context and, indeed, such 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 six days per weeks .That level of commitment may just about get you to the respectable club levels of 1:55, 4:00, 15:00.( and no more – unless you are very naturally talented ). But even then there are no guarantees. So, as Laro Byrne often reminded 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 a lot of the hectic social life which others take for granted .

**4. Communication.** This is a factor which many athletes overlook : they do not seem to realise that good communication with their coach is absolutely essential. It is very difficult to coach a runner if the latter does not communicate frequently and honestly with his coach. It is so frustrating for a coach to hear an athlete complain of a twinge or strain AFTER running in a race –and admitting that he had this problem beforehand but didn’t bother to inform the coach. A coach cannot live with his athletes 24 hours a day ,seven days a week \*; he is doing quite well if he meets his proteges 3-4 times per week ( unless he is an American college coach who has access to his athletes on a daily basis ) and, therefore , is dependent on the athlete to be forthcoming and honest with him. Good communication is also a matter of simple courtesy. If an athlete cannot attend training, for example, he should notify the coach beforehand by call or text. Failure to do so is simply bad manners and raises questions about the character of the athlete. An athlete should ask his coach lots of questions ! Sometimes ,it can be difficult for a coach to actually teach his proteges all they need to know if the only time they meet is for a workout. Usually athletes assemble for training, the coach tells them what they are going to do, they go off and do their warm-up, do the session, do their cool-down and go home ! Not much scope for teaching or learning. I once had an athlete who used to send me an avalanche of texts after every workout asking me about the session and posing all sorts of questions about training in general. At first, this nearly drove me demented (!) but I gradually came to welcome his barrage of questions as I realised that here was an athlete who was really interested in improving and wanted to know more and more about his sport. ( Of course, I could have told him more in one 10-minute phone conversation, or better still, a personal face to face, than I could in 50 texts ! ) One of the most serious forms of lack of communication occurs – or indeed perhaps it is a total breakdown in communication- when the athlete starts doing forms of training not prescribed by the coach. This may involve running more often than recommended or running harder,longer and faster than advised on recovery days or doing types of gym work not conducive to the athlete’s particular event, etc. When, or if ,this happens it is time for both coach and athlete to consider their respective positions as it is a sign that the relationship is in trouble – if not,indeed,completely broken down.

*\* There has been a number of fathers and sons who have had a coach /athlete relationship; in general ,these have not been successful – with the obvious exception of Peter and Seb Coe. It is interesting to note ,however, that while Seb always called his father “dad” when at home , he always addressed him as “coach” when they were training together. Very significant , I think.*

**Finally , let us look at some of the “ Commandments” handed down by some of the greatest distance coaches . These are the “ Golden Rules” : First , Dr. Jack Daniels :** \* When increasing your weekly mileage you should only increase the total by the same number of miles as the training sessions per week you are doing e.g. if you are doing 6-7 training runs per week , then you should increase your weekly total by 6-7 miles up to a maximum of 10 miles. \* The total number of “cruise intervals” ( long reps.) should not exceed 10% of your total weekly mileage. \* The total amount of interval training should not exceed 8% of total weekly mileage . ( For Daniels’ definition of “ interval training” cf. the article in Coaching Corner entitled *Interval Training.)* \* Jogging easily between reps. is the best way to recover.Low intensity exercise helps to clear or recycle blood lactate . \* Improvement ,when doing long reps.and intervals, is best attained by shortening the recoveries and /or increasing the distances rather than running the reps.or “work intervals” faster. \* It is a long road to reaching your potential; attempting to rush along the road too fast may only send you on a detour and prevent you from ever attaining what you so desperately wanted !

**Second , Alberto Salazar :** \* Be consistent . \* Take recovery days seriously: they are part of the training process. \* Train as much as possible on grass or trails. \* Strengthen your whole body. \* Protect your form : every motion should propel your body forward. \* Tackle doubt head on.

**Finally, Seb and Peter Coe :** \* Once you’ve decided what you want to achieve ,commit yourself fully . There are no half-measures. \* Losing is part of the process of winning and often provides the greatest lessons. Losing is NOT the same as failing : losing simply offers scope to do better the next time. \* The “Road to Gold” is usually boulder strewn – and there are no short cuts. \* There is no one template for success in life or sport.

\* Stay true to your own path and don’t allow yourself to be hindered by others’ expectations or limitations. \* If people say “It can’t be done” , that should only make you try harder. \* From physical strength comes the mental resilience and the will to succeed . \* Don’t ask your coach for his opinion unless you want to hear the answer. \* The answer to Life ? You get out what you put in . The same is true of Sport.