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EARLY SUCCESS vs. LONGEVITY

Douglas Finley, Editor

The *Journal of Children's Running* reported in April 2017 that coaches, by a wide margin of those surveyed, agree that fast times and high finishes by young runners are poor values for measuring future stardom or longevity in the sport. We also discussed success being a powerful motivator.

The September issue then reported there is some fear among many coaches that running is going down the same path as other youth sports where extrinsic awards have become more important than the intrinsic experiences. We noted that race officials, for example, reinforce this by handing out awards in the belief awards are central to the running experience. Most troubling, we see parents and kids who make the pursuit of hardware a reason to run.

Following that issue, I received an email from Jonathan Beverly, Editor-In-Chief of *Running Times* magazine, 2000–2015. During his tenure as Editor, *Running Times* became the leading portal for timely articles on all subjects relating to training and racing. Beverly also has written two fine books, *Your Best Stride* and *Run Strong, Stay Hungry*.

Beverly's latest book, *Run Strong, Stay Hungry* (VeloPress, 2017) offers an insightful perspective on the role talent, fast times and high finishes by young runners play in longevity and future success in the sport. But this view is not expressed from the young runners' perspective, but by adults looking back on their own running careers.



Jonathan Beverly

The beginning of his chapter on winning, awards and talent as they relate to longevity in the sport opens with Beverly's own experience.

"I've now coached high school kids long enough to see a generation of them grow up. One thing I've learned is that those who continue running into their adult lives often aren't the ones you expect to.

The state champions, the school record setters, the ones with the most medals and trophies at their graduation receptions often no longer run. The ones who are still running at age 25 or 30 and beyond tend to have been number four or five on the team, or even runners who never placed. The girl who didn't run track but trained by herself and ran a half-marathon in high school is more likely to be on a starting line a decade later than the one who in seventh grade was setting records.

Knowing this, I should not have been surprised by what I heard from lifetime competitors about their own humble beginnings and their perspectives on their abilities. But I was. It's hard not to be dazzled by what they have accomplished in running, how high they have climbed and how fast they still are. But nearly without exception, these runners told me that they were never that good, or if good, not by any means great."

THE PROMISE OF HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Winning - Awards - Talent

In *Run Strong, Stay Hungry*, Jonathan Beverly reveals the “secrets” of 50 lifetime competitors who are still racing fast and loving the sport decades after they got their start. Included are some of America's elite runners, such as Bill Rodgers, Deena Kastor, Joan Benoit Samuelson and Kathrine Switzer. But also, local competitors and age-group champions who exemplify the values of perseverance in the pursuit of self-discovery through running.

Beverly found a “...sense of humility rooted in humble beginnings” was shared by many of the lifetime competitors he interviewed, while discovering that two of the greatest dangers to longevity in the sport are early success and the recognition that follows.

According to Beverly, the danger of being good is that you win, and naturally, garner awards and accolades. “These feel good, and you want more of them. On the one hand, this can motivate you to train and get better, which is a good thing.”

Running icon and author, Amby Burfoot, said, “Being successful is an adrenaline ego buzz, and it breeds more striving for success.” Dave Dunham, a runner of 40 years with a résumé of top finishes in trail and mountain running, agreed, saying there is “...nothing like doing well to motivate you to do more.”

As Burfoot and Dunham continued in the sport they both learned to love the running as much as the winning. But Beverly found others who became more attached to the awards and accolades. “Nearly every lifetime runner told me stories about talented fellow runners who no longer run because they can't win anymore,” he wrote.

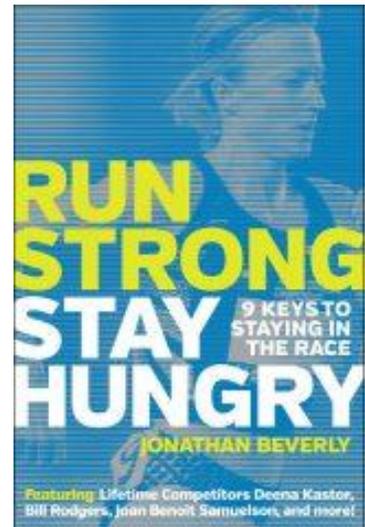
Benji Durden, who has a 2:09 marathon best and was a member of the 1980 Olympic marathon team, told Beverly several elites that he once ran with quit the sport when they found they could no longer be contenders. Running, for them, never was that much fun, he said.

For these runners, Beverly believes “...the results were the motivation. Running was simply the means to an end. When this happens, the activity loses its intrinsic pleasure -- the joy of doing it for its own sake -- and thus serves no purpose when those rewards decline or end.”

Beverly cites Daniel H. Pink's book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, where Pink describes how external rewards only work if the rewards keep increasing. “Rewards can perform a weird sort of behavioral alchemy,” Pink wrote. “They can transform an interesting task into a drudge. They can turn play into work.”

As a lifetime runner, Beverly knows firsthand winning is a powerful motivator. But he understands that while it can inspire runners, it also can be addictive and rob them of other meaningful goals.

“It's not that winning never mattered to lifetime competitors or that they haven't set goals to win races. In fact, they worked hard to win,



“If winning is the sole purpose, at some point running is going to get frustrating. You can't always win, and as you age, you no longer will be able to win.”

***Deena Kastor
Olympic Bronze Medal
Winner and American
Record Holder in
the marathon***

and they cherish those victories. But, significantly, they didn't win from the start; they had to improve and work for it, and it was along that humbling journey where they seemed to have learned the value of running apart from the rewards"

The second danger, according to Beverly, is overplaying early success, which causes young runners to believe they are talented.

From Beverly's perspective, "Parents and coaches too often laud the child's ability and tell them they have a gift. The child will begin to think of success as the result of who they are rather than a result of the work they have done."

The difference between placing the emphasis on *talent* versus valuing *effort* is the theme of psychologist Carol Dweck's book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Dweck describes two different views of the world: the *fixed mindset*, which believes abilities are natural and carved in stone, or the *growth mindset*, which sees qualities as things you can cultivate and improve.

"For runners with a fixed mindset," Beverly writes, "the purpose of running and racing becomes to prove their talent. When they race, they race only to win."

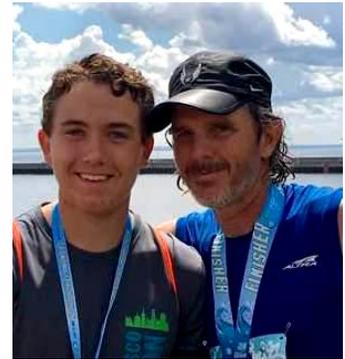
In contrast, those with a growth mindset, relish difficulties as a chance to get better. "The growth mindset allows people to value what they're doing regardless of the outcome," Dweck wrote. "[It] allows people to love what they are doing -- and to continue to love it in the face of difficulties."

What this means for runners, Beverly writes, is that "Lifetime competitors tend to have a growth mindset. Instead of seeing early mediocre performances as an indicator that they lacked talent, they were inspired to improve. Instead of quitting when they didn't reach their dreams, they became, and remained, hungry."

A Process of Growth

For children's running, be it for fitness or sport, the goal is not finite, with starting and ending dates, but instead, the pursuit, the experience, the discovery. It is not only about the fastest or the most talented runners, but also those in the middle of the pack, or even those bringing up the rear. If we, the adults, do our job right, we will open the door to kids who run, regardless of how fast or slow, so they can realize the intrinsic experience, that which will keep them running.

Yes, kids love to race and, for a few, to win. But it is the adult's job to not make winning the primary value, and to not allow awards to be the reason children run. This starts with building running programs around allowing children to discover the joy of running and where running can take them, of ownership, of personal success – a process of growth.



"Coaches need to help young runners recognize that running is not a test of talent but a process of growth. Also, to appreciate running their best no matter where they finish."

Jonathan Beverly



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