

## So you want to get better?

*Dear Team,*

Every year, I'm asked, "How do I get better?" It's a great question and something I've thought through over and over again for many years ... more years than I'd like to admit, haha. That said, I believe there are 4 steps which make up this process, and I'll provide them in what I believe is the correct order of importance:

1. **Desire** – you've got to want to get better. Desire can't be forced or imposed ... it's got to come from you, and not your parents, your coach, your friends, neighbors, BFF, Abby Lee Miller or anyone else. Desire is where everything begins, it's what starts the engine and gets the train rolling out of the station. If there's no desire, the rest of this stuff is irrelevant. Now, when I say desire, I'm talking about a desire that leads to action. I've heard plenty of people talk about wanting to get better, but then show no willingness to ever implement the things that actually lead to them getting better. The closer your desire comes to "all-consuming fire", the more likely you'll get where you want to go, but that's not to say that desire to the point of obsession is good, because obsession can blind you and lead to your applying linear thinking to a very nonlinear sport. I.e., you start thinking like this. Running hard makes me better, so the harder I run, the better I get, and nothing else ... not my health, not my education, not my learning how to function within the context of a team, none of it matters, all that matters is my working hard. That kind of thinking cannot be sustained, because at some point, you'll either break down or find yourself a very lonely, very unhappy person.
2. **Believe** – you've got to believe you can get where you want to go. Given at least some desire, this is the hardest step. In all honesty, I spend more time dealing with this than almost anything else. E.g., it's easy for runners to peg themselves into a spot or ranking on a list. You think that while you are better than one so-and-so, you're not quite as good as some other so-and-so. Suppose you think like that and you're in a race, maybe slightly ahead of someone you are firmly convinced is better than you. What happens? You assume you're going too fast and you either slow down or conjure up all sorts of negative thoughts that ultimately lead to your demise. You see beating "better runners" as impossible and avoid the challenge associated with taking on better people. All of that thinking stems from what psychologists call a "fixed mindset" (parents – if you want to read an awesome book, check out Carol Dweck's book on mindsets). You assume talent is fixed and not something you can really change – as in you're either good or not good, and all the work in the world can't change that. I believe this is wrong, so we advocate a growth mindset on this team and I have bazillions of examples of girls who've adopted that mindset and succeeded on a very high level. In other words, talent, ability and performance are something you can improve over time. The girls who beat you today are girls you CAN beat tomorrow, but the starting point is to truly believe you're capable of getting there. Yes, there are obvious examples of where

this is highly unlikely. E.g., our slowest girl will probably not beat the fastest girl in KY most likely ever, much less by tomorrow. If it really is true that you're just a number on a list, however, and that no amount of hard work will ever change your ranking on that list, then this competitive stuff is all fairly pointless. You've got to believe that you can achieve great things, whatever "great" happens to be, that potential is not fixed, that your potential can improve and that ... thank God Almighty ... you can get to the promised land. J

At the same time, remember that "believing" is a dynamic process. There will be days when your belief comes crashing down, and days when it soars. What needs to happen is that you retain your belief, that faith in yourself, regardless of what "the evidence" seems to suggest on any given day. One bad workout or even a series of bad workouts does not mean you actually suck now and should give up on your aspirations of greatness. Understand that improvement can be defined in many different ways and that you can be very unfair with yourself if you narrowly define improvement as some constant process of always going faster every day. Sometimes, improvement means getting better relative to your last workout under similar circumstances, or maybe getting more consistent over the season. It's normal to question your ability from time to time, but as you move forward your focus should be on how to improve your areas of weakness and not whether you can ever really achieve your goals.

3. **Hard work** – this one's pretty straight forward. If you work hard, then your body adapts and the physiological process of super-compensation will take you to the next level. Not much to say here other than to reiterate something ... hard work isn't #1 or even #2 on this list, it's #3. Our job as coaches is to create a structure where you will work hard in a way that leads to physical improvement. Again, it's not just the body that needs to adapt though, it's also the mind. We also need to remember that with the distance runners, our program embodies the principles of progression by allowing you to do more over time, rather than throw the kitchen sink at you in year one and hope you can adapt. Teams who just toss the whole plate at you are catering to the linear thinking approach I mentioned above that too often leads to injury and loneliness.
4. **Ancillary work** – this includes all the little things that should accompany hard work. E.g., you need to get your sleep, you need to eat right, do strength work, etc. All of this stuff helps you remain healthy and allows you to properly recover from hard work. While believe is the most difficult step, ancillary work is the easiest to neglect. Runners often have this mistaken belief that it's all about running, and nothing else really matters. Maybe, but amenorrheic girls do get stress fractures and it's hard to PR when you're on crutches. Similarly, not getting enough sleep does keep you from recovering properly, and failing to do a core/hip or strength routine on a regular basis does make you more susceptible to injury. Great runners have said that success requires "embracing the grind", and that means doing all the little things that support the hard work you do and allow you to continue improving. The best analogy with this stuff is this - putting a big motor in a car doesn't guarantee that the car will be very fast,

because unless you make the car capable of handling that big motor, all the extra horsepower will be meaningless if the car breaks down at the starting line.

What we're trying to do with many of you is pretty simple. We're working at making you better at doing the hard work and at helping you create positive habits with our ancillary work which will allow you to handle that hard work and improve.

We're striving to help your bodies get stronger, but also your mind. Creating a stronger foundation of "belief" comes with sometimes putting you in situations where you've got to make a choice. E.g., in one situation, I may ask you to run with people you assume are much better than you. The idea here is several fold. For one, you will eventually (hopefully) realize that these faster girls are just like you, they're girls. They don't have capes, no winged feet, they just work hard, want to improve really bad, and are willing to do what it takes to achieve greatness. Their starting point was probably a lot like yours, but they made choices which led them to where they are now, choices I may now be asking you to make. On any given day, you may stay with them or even do better than some of them. If you do, then that ranking I mentioned up above goes out the window and you realize that your potential isn't predetermined. In and of itself, that's a big step right there. For two, you also create a standard for yourself. Every time you step up to run with the "good girls", you can measure your improvement relative to the last outing. If you stay with them for all but 10 minutes one day, and the next time stay for all but 5 minutes, you obviously got better.

I may also ask you to do workouts that seem "impossible", but again, where you need to make a choice. Workouts are obviously physical, but they're also mental. A great workout can sometimes do more for your mindset and belief than it'll ever do for you physically. In some cases, the whole point of the practice may be to help you develop an appropriate mindset.

You won't necessarily "win" every challenge, and challenges won't necessarily come every day, every week or on any sort of regular schedule. Sometimes the best challenges are actually the ones that suddenly get tossed in your lap without warning. Regardless, however, if you're open to the idea of challenges, then the challenges will continue, and as you accept and hopefully overcome at least some of them, you'll be moving in the right direction. In summary, that's really the point here. It's not about getting to a specific level in terms of a time or performance, it's about forward movement. There will be times when progress is difficult or simply not possible, but as long as you're moving forward in some sense, then you're doing well.

Hopefully this will help shed light on what getting better is all about. As your coaches, we are all about helping you get where you want to be, which makes this a joint effort. If you have concerns, then share them with us. If you haven't vocalized your interest in getting better, then feel free to share that as well. Whether you ever become amazing will never be the point as much as the fact that you at least opened the door and tried.

Barry