

Is Distance Running a Metaphor for Life?

By Clay Williams

I ran my first marathon in 2005. I was 45 years old and amazed that my body was able to do something so extreme. I remember being at the halfway point and thinking about how my finish time was going to be better than I expected. But the last five kilometres were not so encouraging; my feet and most of my muscles were really sore and I was seriously exhausted. It took me so long to finish that the race organizers were folding up tables when I crossed the finish line. But I finished.

Since then I've gone on to run longer and longer distances. In 2015 I ran 750 km from Port Severn to Ottawa. And just a couple of months ago I ran 200 miles in three days.

As I look back on that run, it occurs to me that running such a long run doesn't require an olympic class body with super elite fitness. Let's face it; I'm 60 years old and train three or four days a week, I'm hardly the elite professional athlete.

What it does take is a perceived effort far beyond what we give in day to day life. Perceived effort. That's an important concept. Let me explain. When I go on my morning runs, typically 10 to 14 km every second day, I run the first half of the distance at a comfortable pace. That pace can vary from day to day depending on food and rest and road conditions. At the halfway point I usually try to increase my pace just a little so that I run the second half at a faster pace than the first half. This is called negative splits. But my body is tired during that second half. In order to run just a little bit faster, the ACTUAL effort is just a little bit more, the actual energy expended is only slightly more. But because my body is already tired, the PERCEIVED effort is much higher.

When I run a really long race or event, for example 24 hours or more, I try to maintain a fairly slow speed for the first few hours, because I know that my body will eventually slow down, and the perceived effort required to maintain my speed will be huge. I remember a statistic from early on in my running career about 100 mile races. The average runner finishes the second half of a 100 mile race in a time that is 30% longer than finishing the first half. That says a lot about perceived effort.

Back in early October, I spent 75 hours running and covered 200 miles on a one mile loop course. The second 100 miles was something that I think most people are unwilling to do. While every part of my being was trying to tell me to stop and sleep and eat, my mind (and my support crew) was telling my body to keep moving. The perceived effort was off the charts, it was a monumental effort to "will" my body to trot down a small incline then walk up the other side, again and again. And the people who were my pace runners didn't even see it. As I ran and walked along the course, anybody looking at me would never know how exhausted I am, how my body is screaming for me to lie down and sleep.

And isn't that a metaphor for life? Aren't there times when the effort seems incredibly hard even though we're going much slower than we normally would? Aren't there times when we've persevered through something that we thought we might never endure? Aren't there times when people see a confident strong achiever when we feel broken, damaged, barely able to cope? And that person who is coping is not some super hero, not any sort of elite achiever, but instead just a regular person doing what needs to be done.

When I stand at the starting line of a multi-day run, I know that I have to get to the end. I don't *think* I can get there, I don't *hope* I can make it, I *know* that I have to get it done. And it gets done. Regardless of the effort, regardless of the obstacles that stand in the way, regardless of how I feel.

There are times in our lives when it feels like the obstacle in front of us is just too big, times when we're exhausted and it feels like we've been doing the same thing forever. But the hard things get done because we know they **MUST** be done, there is no plan B, the other option is not acceptable. And we get to the next day. And we look back and think: "wow, that was tough". You've probably been there. You've done it, and you can do it again.