7 Habits of Highly Effective Runners

As runners, we all have unique backgrounds and different reasons for getting into the sport. The following seven habits are behaviors the most highly effective runners — not necessarily the fastest runners — have in common and practice every day. Make them work for you and become a more motivated, happier and fitter athlete.

by Mario Fraioli

1. They set various types of goals.

Goals vary and will likely change as you improve and gain more running experience. Newer runners may want simply to complete the distance for the first time, while more experienced runners may be focused on running a personal best or hitting a desired time. Regardless of your intentions, there are two types of goals: outcome goals and process goals. Highly effective runners recognize the importance of both.

Outcome goals are what most people think of when they talk about goal setting. These are the intended result of all your hard work and preparation and are specific (e.g., lose weight, finish the race) and measurable (e.g., finish in 2 hours, place top 5 in age group). Thinking about outcome goals induces both excitement and nerves. But they're also largely out of your control. And let's be honest, if you knew exactly how fast you were going to run on race day, a lot of the fun would be taken out of the whole experience. That's what makes outcome goals so exciting. And nerve-racking.

Equally as — or even more important — than outcome goals are process goals. They're not as exciting and probably won't make you nervous when you think about them. But the great news is that process goals, unlike outcome goals, are completely in your control. And the more of them you achieve with regularity, the more confidence you'll gain.

These two kinds of goals are linked. The more successful you are at

accomplishing your process goals — habitual actions you can check off every day, such as getting 8 hours of sleep a night, making healthy food choices at mealtime, doing core-strengthening exercises daily, etc. — the better you'll set yourself up for achieving your outcome goals.

2. They enjoy the process.

Many runners make the mistake of only setting outcome goals, and their idea of success or enjoyment hinges upon hitting a desired time in workouts or races or securing a particular placing on race day. This can induce unnecessary pressure and lead to frustration and feelings of failure if these goals aren't achieved, thus killing the fun factor of one of our favorite activities.

Highly effective runners enjoy the ongoing process of training and competing.

Even though races tend to be the culmination of weeks or months of training, the reality is the process never really ends. Learn to appreciate the enjoyment of an easy run as much as the feeling of pushing beyond your limits in a workout or race. Cherish the time you get to spend with your training partners and motivate one another to improve. Don't sink too low after a poor race or let a bombed workout ruin your day. Remind yourself that training is an ongoing purpose and the more enjoyment you can find in it — even on your toughest days — the more effective tomorrow will be.

3. They value consistency.

"The best way to get better at anything is by doing it consistently," coach Joe Rubio told Competitor.com in 2014.

Simple advice, right? Well it is, but that doesn't mean consistency is an easy thing to achieve. You need to work at it every day. Consistency doesn't just mean running on a regular basis (although there's a lot of value in that) but it's more about developing good habits that become part of your running lifestyle. Whether you're super fit or completely out of shape, consistency will go a long way in helping you to eliminate excuses on your way to improving your fitness, enhancing enjoyment and becoming a more effective runner.

Find a training program that works for you and stick with it instead of chasing the latest hot trend. Establish a weekly routine that works for your schedule and don't waver from it. Make time for the preventative exercises you need to do to help ward off injury. Get to bed at a decent hour every night. Remember: Success is the result of doing the right things day after day and week after week.

"The biggest thing is consistency," says rising marathoner star Ryan Vail. "I'm still working with the same coach, Dave Smith, so the workouts and training plan have stayed fairly similar from one block to the next, just getting a little bit longer and a little bit faster each time. But no big jumps in training, just taking baby steps."

4. They run at a few different speeds.

Don't be a one-speed wonder: even if racing isn't your thing, or you don't consider yourself to be super fast, get out of your comfort zone a couple times a week and do a variety of workouts at different speeds and intensity levels.

While regular bouts of slow to steady running will help you maintain your general fitness and build up your basic endurance, the lack of variety in your weekly routine will eventually lead to a physical and mental plateau. Introducing new stimuli such as interval workouts or hill sessions will present a new challenge, add a fun element into the mix and accelerate fitness gains. Are you doing most of your runs on flat surfaces? Hit the hills every once in a while and develop lower-leg strength while simultaneously working on improving your running form.

Finally, running at different speeds and intensities over a variety of terrain will add some newfound enjoyment to your normal running routine and break up the monotony of running at the same pace every day, help ward off annoying overuse injuries and contribute to helping make you into a highly effective runner.

5. They take their recovery seriously.

Most runners don't like to talk about what happens during downtime from training following a big training run or race because most of it, quite frankly, is pretty boring. That said, the most highly effective runners take their recovery as seriously as their training and racing.

A wise coach once told me, "You are only as good as you recover" and he couldn't be more correct.

Why? Because recovery is when improvements happen. Yes, you need long runs, challenging workouts and steady weekly mileage to break out of your comfort zone and propel you to better race performances, but if you can't recover from those hard efforts, they aren't doing you much good. Without rest, not only are you denying your body time to adapt to the stress it's under and to enable the gains you have made to take hold, but also you are sure to start your next workout under-fueled, exhausted, or possibly fighting off illness or injury.

As you rest — sleeping, relaxing on the couch on Saturday afternoon, or engaging in something slightly more active, such as your easy run days or appropriate warm-ups and cool-downs — you are reaping the benefits from your hard workouts. Stressed bones, broken-down muscle tissue, and exhausted energy systems are repairing themselves to come back stronger for your next workout and power you to a higher level of performance.

Don't be a knucklehead and run hard all the time, refuse to take days off, scale back your mileage or make excuses as to why you can't get enough sleep at night. Elite athletes — some of the most highly effective runners you will find anywhere — place a premium on their recovery by getting enough rest and doing the things they need to do following a hard racer training session to ensure they're ready to get after it again the next day.

6. They focus on quality over quantity.

More isn't bad, but it's not always better. While a loaded racing schedule, impressive long runs and big mileage weeks will certainly help foster improvement and provide something worth bragging about to your training mates — highly effective runners know it's the quality of their races and

workouts that matter most at the end of the day.

When planning your race schedule, focus on a few key races to peak for throughout the year. No matter how experienced of a runner you are or how fit you think you might be, you can't be "on" all the time, nor can you realistically expect to run a personal best every time you step on the starting line.

In regard to training, highly effective runners don't run mileage for mileage's sake, or force a 10th repetition in an interval workout if your pace started to fall off considerably after number 9. Every mile has a purpose. Look back at your own training history to determine the right mix of quality and quantity for you. The formula is going to be different for every runner. Remember: Don't count the miles — make the miles count.

7. They recognize and celebrate their achievements — no matter how small.

As highly effective runners, we are always looking ahead toward the next goal, which is an integral part of continual improvement. Equally important, however, is that we take the time along the way to recognize and celebrate our achievements, no matter how trivial they may seem.

The most highly effective runners don't undervalue their accomplishments. Every time you cross a finish line, even if it wasn't the big personal best you were hoping for, be grateful for that performance. Race results are never guaranteed — personal bests even less so. Every finish line is worthy of at least a small celebration.

And when someone congratulates you after a race, even if it fell short of what you were setting out to do, be gracious and just say thank you. No one likes an unappreciative runner. Even if you're disappointed with your performance, someone watching might be inspired by it, and that's certainly an unintended achievement worth celebrating at the end of the day.

Finally, the most highly effective runners know that every day they're able to

get a run in is worth recognizing and celebrating, even if that celebration is as simple as high-fiving a training partner after a tough workout or cracking a satisfactory smile following a solo long run in bad weather. Never lose sight of the fact that you've achieved something!