

To Go Long, or Not To Go Long?

BY: MIKE HAMBERGER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: DAN HICOK

If that is the question, then it must nearly be spring. Right now, hundreds of DC-area triathletes are sitting on the fence as to whether they should test their limits and sign up for a spring marathon or half Ironman (IM). When I sit down with the athletes I coach each winter to discuss their spring goals, I know I'll be asked that question. My initial thought in helping my athletes answer it is usually simple: if it takes too long to ponder, then I would say "no." That might surprise many people, since we are all told that "challenging goals" and "pushing our boundaries" are what makes this sport fun and rewarding. However, my rationale lies in a concept I've seen discussed in *Tri-DC* magazine before; one that lies at the heart of defining "fun" and "rewarding" experiences. That is the "Flow State," a term coined by social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.



Last year, I was asked by a *Runner's World* editor if I thought that the cut-off time for marathons should be reduced (he was writing a piece on the subject). We agreed that there may be such a thing as running a marathon too slowly, in which case I would put finishing a Half-IM in that same category. This raises the question, "At what point does the element of fun subside in these endeavors?" This is relevant because we can ask, "When the last 13.1 miles of either race turns into a lesson in suffering and 'fun' is long gone, do we vow to come back again next year in better shape, or do we vow never to put ourselves through 'anything like that again?' Do we even finish the race? Statistical trends show that marathon times in the U.S. (among all finishers) are improving little by little. This statistic is promising, but what about marathoners finishing in over 6 hours, or half-IM competitors finishing in over 7 hours? Do they stick with the sport, or do they cross the feat off their to-do list and return to just being a gym rat? If it's the latter, was their experience with the race negative and disheartening? If you are a first-time marathoner or half-IMer this year, are you really prepared for 'baptism by fire?' Is the journey really greater than the destination?

The point is obviously not to discourage people from testing their limits or setting goals. Rather, I would like to emphasize proper goal-setting, and that beckons the concept of Flow. Flow has been described as the "ultimate experience," the mental state of operation in which a person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing, has a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity. Often, we equate the state of flow with the state of being "in the zone." When the flow state occurs, we lose all sense of time; we are totally lost in the activity, almost unaware of what we are doing. Most importantly, to achieve the flow state, our

minds and bodies must be stretched to their limits in pursuit of an endeavor when our skills are equally matched with the challenge in front of us. So you must ask yourself, "How does my ability match the end-goal of this race?" Flow pertains to proper goal setting in the sense that goals are meant to be challenging, yet realistic.

I believe that many people, especially athletes, set goals that are too high, in essence biting off more than they can chew. Out of U.S. adults, 78% are sedentary and 66% are overweight, and research shows that 50% of the people that made a New Year's resolution to start an exercise program this year will drop out before June. I honestly feel the latter statistic is rooted in individuals setting goals that are too difficult, then quitting once they realize they can't achieve these goals. Last spring I sug-

gested to many of my athletes that they not run the Marine Corps Marathon, and this winter I suggested that others not register for a spring half-IM. Why? Because, though the prospect of their "finishing" is very high, in attempting to set them up for a more rewarding experience: tackling the longer distances when their skills are better aligned with the challenge - the core of the flow state. In the process, I'm also helping to ensure they don't have a disheartening experience with the race, and thus are more likely to remain active in the long-term.

If your goal for a marathon is to break the 4-hour mark, then you will no doubt be ecstatic if you cross the line in 3:59:38! You may have

had the same sense of joy earlier in your racing career when you were trying to break six hours and you crossed the line in 5:59:38. However, one of these races was no doubt a much more enjoyable and rewarding experience. Some may argue that it's a good feeling to note the significant progress you have made over the years, with which I would usually agree. However, I do not think it's necessary to have a potentially discouraging experience as a beginner, especially since the prospect of continuing as a runner or marathoner after a six-hour performance might be diminished.

Setting oneself up to achieve goals and the flow state applies to athletes of all ability levels. We must all realize that the goals need to be challenging, yet realistic, which implies that our skills are matched to the task. So in deciding whether or not a full marathon, half-Ironman, or even a full Ironman should be in the cards for you this year, I have no doubt that you'll be proud when you finish, but I'd like to offer a bit of advice that is rarely heard: you may want to wait until you are fitter and stronger before you go long, so that ultimately, you can be fully engaged in the activity and not filled with overwhelming feelings of pain, suffering, or self-doubt. Maybe that just means waiting until the fall. Eventually, a bit of patience in of goal setting will allow for a more rewarding experience, and perhaps the ultimate experience - being in the Flow!

Good luck!

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