

Racing Tough

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In interviewing and writing about Joey Warner for this month's Pacer of the Month column, I was reminded of two old friends from days long gone--Mike Viglietta and Andy Kaestner. Both could be described in the same way that Gulf Coast Running Club President (and PCP member) Leonard Vergunst described Joey: "When I see (him) on the line I say 'there's no way a guy that big is going to beat me.' But half the time he does. He's amazing."

"Viggs" Viglietta and I ran together on my high school cross country team. There were a lot of talented guys on the team and all of them looked the part: tall, thin and muscular. And then there was Mike, the "Keg With Legs." He was short and stocky, constantly battling a beer gut, and usually dressed in baggy shorts or pajamas while warming up for a race. But somehow, by senior year the goof became one of the best runners in the county.

"Spike" Kaestner was arguably the least athletic looking walker among my training partners the year I spent at the University of Wisconsin in 1987. He was short, baby-faced and kind of "doughy" looking, pretty slow over 5 or 10K compared to just about everybody else, and he trained every day with the same dirty, too-small \$2.99 NY Yankees cap sitting on top of his head. Spike wound up making the 1988 Olympic Team in the 50K. Well, it just shows to go you, you can't judge a buck by his cover. None of these stellar athletes look overly threatening on the starting line, but their strength isn't so much in their physical attributes (although clearly they are all very good athletes) as in their mental toughness--their heart.. To quote my Mexican friends, these guys race con Cajones. And so can you.

Whenever you race there are apt to be conflicting voices in your head. When the going gets tough, the loudest voices say things like: "This is stupid. I feel like garbage and I'm gonna slow down until things start feeling better." But there's always that tiny little voice of pride. The voice that says "I can do this. All I have to do is keep these legs moving." Of course it's not always easy, but if you talk down those negative voices, you can work through the tough patches and keep yourself moving on pace.

Whether it's a 5K or a marathon, there's always a point where your legs aren't going to want to play anymore. That's when you need to buckle down and do whatever it takes to stay focused on that one "simple" task: keeping your feet hitting the pavement one after the other in rapid succession. If you're close to the end of the race, keeping that focus is easy. But most of the time your legs start feeling heavy long before the cold beer at the finish line, in which case it can be extremely difficult to keep them moving. That's when you have to break things into manageable parts. If you start shutting down with four kilometers to go in a 10K, the last thing you want to do is think about how horrible those 2 1/2 miles are going to be. So don't. Just take it 1 kilometer at a time.

Psychologically, the last kilometer is easy--you're gunning for the finish line. And if all you're thinking about is the one kilometer you're working on, that too will be easy. It's all the kilometers between you and the last one that get those ugly negative thoughts boiling to the top. So forget about them! Just worry about keeping yourself going for those next few minutes, then when you knock that kilometer off, work on the next.

But what if there aren't any kilometer marks? Well, you could think about that next mile, but a mile is a long way when your legs are turning into jelly. It's probably not a good idea to focus on such a long distance, so you're probably better off focusing on the next best thing: your competitors.

Unless you're the lead dog, there are always going to be people ahead of you to focus on, track down, and pass

during a race. Use them. Look ahead a few dozen meters to a good target: the guy in the girlie pink shorts, that racewalker way up there, or the juggler in the gorilla costume who beat you two weeks ago. Don't pick someone who is clearly dying--you're going to catch him anyway. Pick someone who looks strong, but who's not pulling away from you. Use their strength to keep yourself going. When you catch your target, urge them to work with you. If they don't have what it takes to keep up with you, drop 'em like sack of maggots.

The great thing is, that guy in the gorilla costume, the dude in the pink shorts, and sure, maybe even that racewalker, they're all human and they're all hurting. And most will start running out of gas mid-way through the race. A few will be tough enough to fight through it and keep hammering. Whether you're built like a Kenyan, or a Keg With Legs, make sure you're among that latter group--the Warners, Kaestners and Vigliettas of the world who race with heart.

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