

# (IM)PERFECT

By Jeff Matlow

**F**or just about everybody in this world, there are four seasons. In my world there are five: winter, spring, summer, fall and injury. You can time it all by the sun and the rotation of the earth. It's like clockwork. No matter what you do, inevitably the snow will fall, the sun will shine, the birds will chirp and I will be limping and cussing.

Last year, however, was going to be different. Last year I was going to be smarter – to defy the laws of nature. So I started my training slowly and cautiously, not building my distance or speed in any type of hurry. I changed my running form to one that wasn't so physically demanding.

One month rolled into two, two into four, and soon I realized that I was actually running better and stronger than I had in a decade. I did a couple of races and, lo and behold, there was no pain on the run. I could push and pass people like I did in my youth.

I felt like a new man. I had faced the forces of nature and emerged the conqueror. "I'm the king of the world!" I screamed from the proverbial ship's bow.

So while I was feeling great, immersed in my Leonardo DiCaprio moment, I did what any new man might do: I tried new things. I pushed the pace a little bit harder. I began to do a lot of hill

training. Then one early morning, in a sudden burst of Chariots of Fire-ness, I decided to do a 2 hour run barefoot, on the beach, in the sand, on an uneven surface. It looked like so much fun in the movies.

The edge of the Pacific Ocean is beautiful and peaceful in the early morning hours. It is a Zen-like serenity with the silent undulations of an endless blanket of water and the soothing sound of the waves rolling on shore. It was the perfect cinematic symbolism of my rebirth as the unstoppable athlete. I dipped my feet in the water, wiggled my toes like they do in the movies, started humming Vangelis' greatest hits and took my first step down the long expanse of coastline before me.

Everything was great. At least for the first 60 seconds.

It started with a slight tightening of my calf, just a little more than usual. "No problem," I said to myself, "I'm a new man, I can run through it." Five more minutes of super slow jogging with the leg muscles getting even tighter, and I decided it might be better to stop and stretch. So I stretched and then did another 5 minutes of jogging and more pain and another bout of stretching.

I was determined to do my run, but here I was less than 15 minutes in and things were getting worse. Of course that never stopped me before and, after all, I'm a new man. So, immune to the fact that I was attempting a 2 hour run barefoot on a slanted surface, and refusing to accept the feeling that my leg was going to break in half, I started running again without a second thought.

Then it happened. It was one of those knife-piercing, hurts-to-walk type of injuries. It was the kind of debilitating pain that could make a grown man almost cry. In one fateful step, I realized that all the strength I had built up over the year, all the stamina and speed, all of it, in 1 second, was destroyed. I almost cried. I cussed and yelled. Still feeling somewhat cinematic, I gazed at the endless expanse of the ocean and felt a wave of sadness envelope me. I had transformed from Leonardo DiCaprio in Titanic to the isolated loneliness of Tom Hanks in Castaway. "WIIIIIL-SOONNNNNN!!!!" I screamed symbolically to nobody in particular.

I turned around and started hobbling back to the car, each hobble more painful than the last. I was angry, frustrated, distraught, perturbed and every other distressed adjective I could conjure up. That was the exact moment, as I was hobbling in my embroiled pain, that the seagull took a crap on my head.

Of course. I had transmogrified into Steve Martin from "The Jerk."

I finally got back to the car with my leg feeling worse, wiped the bird poop off my head and called my friend Jon to vent. "Why do you keep

doing this to yourself?" Jon asked. "You're a jerk. When are you going to learn that the exercise is actually hurting you, not helping you? Maybe you should take up something less impactful. Like knitting. Or pottery."

Mental note, don't call Jon next time I get injured.

As I sat there swimming in my pool of frustration, I began to think about all of the adversity I've encountered in my athletic career. It's been years filled with injuries and sickness and bad races and bad weather and flat tires and nutrition problems and and and.

"There's always something," I sighed to myself as I plunged deeper into the vicious whirlpool of self-pity. Adversity was bringing me down. I had enough. Maybe Jon was right, maybe I should go buy some clay.

For 20 years, I've been waiting for the perfect season of training leading to the perfect race. I've been waiting for everything to go smoothly, where my body always feels great, where I improve on a daily basis and where, on race day, I suddenly start running sub-5 minute miles without breaking a sweat. For 20 years I've been waiting for my training to feel just like it appears for all the athletes I see in the movies.

But the reality is that I'm not going to suddenly turn into Seabiscuit. The perfect, pain-free, problem-free race doesn't exist. There is adversity and there always will be. Nobody ever said triathlon was easy. In fact, nobody ever said life was easy.

You see, I came to realize that adversity is a part of life. The big challenge in life and in sport is not whether you'll get through the adversity but, rather, how you deal with the adversity when it begins to get to you, what you learn from your experience and who you become because of it.

Adversity is not a means of dragging you down, but an opportunity to build you up. In all my decades of racing triathlon I suppose this might be one of the most important lessons I've learned: that the perfect race and the perfect season is completely imperfect. That life is not about fearing adversity but of confronting it and conquering it and becoming a better person because of it. Adversity, in a funny way, is in itself, perfection. It proves that I'm human and not a celluloid figment of my imagination.

Somehow with this simple understanding, my season improved dramatically. Sure I couldn't run on the road for a few months, but in the end I emerged the winner. I had one of the best, most frustrating and most painful races of my career. It was perfect. ■

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