

FEATURES

BACK ON TRACK

MARK RIDDAWAY USED TO THINK THAT RUNNING WAS A FORM OF MASOCHISM. BUT A FEW WEEKS WITH A LOCAL EXERCISE SCIENTIST AND COACH PUT THE PLEASURE INTO PAVEMENT POUNDING





It is three and a half weeks into the training and four miles into yet another run when a moment of genuine revelation occurs – a true road-to-Damascus experience. I've always hated running. Unless it's towards a ball or away from a gang of hooded youths, I really don't see the point. It's tedious and unnecessary.

I hate the constant internal dialogue that rattles around my head – “This hurts. Why don't you just stop? Or take a shortcut at least? Why are you doing this?” I hate the plodding repetition, the lack of mental stimulation and the absence of any obvious point.

Plus I have this competitive imp that lives in a cavity at the base of my brain and turns absolutely everything I do into some kind of contest. It means that on the rare occasions when I do go jogging I'm always trying to race people who are patently younger, fitter, faster runners than me and who are oblivious to the fact that they're being raced. I'm like a stupid dog, chasing cars. I wear myself out too quickly then repent at leisure, while the more sensible part of my brain nags at me for being an idiot as I plod slowly and tortuously home while all the athletes I overtook earlier cruise effortlessly back past me. As I said, I hate running.

But three weeks and four miles into the training, everything changes. The first lap of the park follows the usual routine of boredom, internal conflict and mindless chasing, but then, out of nowhere, I realise that I've just run another mile without even noticing. My limbs have found a comfortable rhythm and they're just getting on with their job, not even bothering to report back to my brain that they're tired or bored. Everything feels easy and natural and light, and my pace picks up. I feel slightly drugged. I'm

actually enjoying it. The next four miles pass by with my body fixed into a groove while my brain distractedly chases some pleasantly meandering thought process. As I complete the eight miles, my first thought is that I could quite easily just keep on going. My second thought is that I can't wait to tell Jon.

Jon Denoris is one of the country's top personal trainers, operating from Club 51 – a beautifully appointed studio in a New Cavendish Street townhouse. He's the man record labels go to if they want their latest starlet to look perfect, the man major corporations employ to get their executives fighting fit, the man Harley Street clinics refer their patients to for help with physical rehabilitation. When I first met Jon with the idea of interviewing him, I thought maybe I'd go along and spend an hour with him doing a workout. But he couldn't see how I could possibly get a sense of what he does in so short a time. “What we need is a proper goal,” he told me, “something tangible to aim for.” In Jon's mind, if it's worth doing at all, it's worth doing with complete conviction. Which is why I'm booked in to run a half marathon, why the competitive imp and I have decided that a time of less than 1 hour 45 minutes is my target, and why I have just six intensive weeks of training to prepare.

Jon has me in early in the morning for my first session. After I've been weighed, measured, questioned and assessed, we're off and running straight away, quite literally. We head out into the cold, running around Regent's Park until we get to a small cinder track. There we do some interval running – a lap at three quarter pace, then a minute's rest, four times in total. Afterwards Jon gets me to run the same 15 metre stretch of track over and over again, using increasingly

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weird strides – first with feet kicking back, then with thighs raised high, then the same again, but at double leg speed, then skipping along like a big girl, then finally and most strangely, crawling along low to the ground like Spiderman. He cajoles and encourages, but if I'm not doing something properly he asks me to do it again. If the quality of what I'm doing deteriorates through fatigue, we move on to another exercise rather than chase diminishing returns. Jon even has the good grace not to laugh at my complete inability to find the correct arm and leg pattern when I'm skipping (like a particularly malcoordinated big girl). He just gets me to keep on trying until I finally sort it out.

In my second session I'm shown a circuit of different exercises designed to fatigue my legs – squats, lunges, steps and a horrible thing that involves sticking an exercise ball under my shins in a press up position, then pulling my knees up to my chest. Twenty of each. Three times around with a minute's break between. Then we head straight out to run a circuit of Regent's Park in the cold rain. The idea is to train my body to work when my legs are tired – it's like a shortcut to the feelings my I'll experience several miles into a distance race.

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Jon fails wholeheartedly to fit with any of my ignorant preconceptions of what a personal trainer should be. He's not a sadist, pushing his victims until they collapse, he's not a bawling military drill sergeant, and he's not some jargon-spouting pseudo-scientist, flogging the latest fad. He's a likeable, engaging, highly intelligent man, and the fact that while we train we can chat away about sport or news or music makes the time fly. It also helps that when I'm running he's running with me, not cycling alongside bellowing through a megaphone.

I'm also heartily reassured that Jon is actually a proper scientist with a real understanding of human anatomy, nutrition and psychology, boasting a degree in human movement studies and an MSc in exercise psychology. He talks with great clarity and enthusiasm about both the physical and mental aspects of exercise, and it's no surprise that he's in demand as a public speaker and a TV talking head. I trust him completely – he's able to explain in detail why he's getting me to do a particular exercise, which matters a lot to me. Much to Jon's chagrin, pretty much any fool can call himself a personal trainer, but not many could make me appreciate running.

As the weeks go by, Jon works to increase my speed and stamina. We spend one lunchtime running up and down the steep slopes of Primrose Hill while infinitely more sensible people sit around in the sunshine enjoying their sandwiches. In the evenings and at the weekends, I follow a programme of runs, slowly building up my distance and speed. It's one Saturday morning, out in the park, that the whole pleasure revelation occurs. It's not a one-off either – the same thing happens the following weekend, this time testing my 10km speed on a treadmill at my local gym – a gym that I used to think was quite pleasant, but that now seems utterly inadequate, horribly impersonal and annoyingly lacking in fluffy white towels.

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Jon seems pleased with my progress, so with just two weeks to go he puts me through the mill of some serious lactate training. I assumed this to be something involving pregnant woman learning how to use breast pumps. It's not. Instead, it involves an intense circuit of five different leg exercises, 20 repetitions of each. After completing the circuit I'm given a minute's rest before hitting the treadmill to run 400 metres at a brisk speed of 11km/h. Each time I complete a circuit, the treadmill speed is cranked up by a unit. By the fourth time around, my muscles are screaming at me like a pair of two-year-olds who don't want to be dragged around the supermarket. But I drag them along anyway, ignoring their tantrums. To make matters worse, Jon has decided to stop playing nice and is chastising me for sloppy, half-hearted squats and making me start my reps from scratch until I get them right. As I'm completing a sequence of dips, I can see him in the mirror raising the height of a bench I have to jump over, turning what was already a pretty agonising exercise into something that even Dick Cheney might balk at authorising. You bastard, I think. You cold, heartless bastard.

With the treadmill now at 14, I examine Jon's face for clues that this might, please God, be the end of session, but he just stands there, arms folded, watching me impassively like a taller version of Yoda. Every fibre of my body is pleading with me to tell him that I've had enough and that I'm only doing this for an article and I don't really care and I just want to stop. But the competitive imp is shouting back: "Don't listen to your legs, keep going. Don't give him the satisfaction." The imp wins. On the fifth circuit I feel pretty invincible. My muscles are so fatigued that I struggle to stay upright, but the wind is in my sails again and I know I can keep on going for as long as it takes, no matter how high he raises that damned bench. He's still shouting

at me to get higher or lower or faster or slower, but I don't care. On the treadmill, with the speed at 15km/h, I feel like I'm wading through treacle, but the 400 metres pass quickly and I'm soon climbing down, ready to go again. That's when Jon hands me a towel and a glass of water.

"Good work," he says. "I'm impressed." And rather than punching him to the floor and escaping while I still can, I stand there, legs shaking like a pneumatic drill operator at the end of a shift, and I feel a wave of pride and happiness and gratitude wash over me. I appear to have a serious case of Stockholm Syndrome. What happened to the gentle approach, I ask. He grins. "I had to get you to trust me first," he says. "If I'd done that to you on day one, you'd never have come back."

The week before the half marathon is all about rest and recovery. I do a couple of sessions on the exercise bike and a gentle 5km jog – a distance that would previously have seemed like a proper slog, but that now feels like a bit of a stroll. Jon gives me some tips on the race – try to start near the front to stop being boxed in, stick to your natural rhythm, and don't whatever you do try to chase down the Kenyans. His dietary advice is also pretty simple – a couple of days before the race start carbohydrate loading. Basically, eat huge amounts of wholemeal rice, pasta and bread until you're completely full, then eat some more.

At the start line, on a warm, sunny Sunday morning, I feel good. I've eaten too much porridge, which

keeps repeating on me, but I'm sure that'll fade. Following Jon's advice, I manage to force myself towards the front along with all the proper runners, so for the first couple of miles I have to put up with having loads of people overtaking me. For once, the stupid dog just lets the cars drive past without reacting.

There's a big hill just after the six mile mark, climbing steeply for several hundred metres, which I force myself up without dropping my pace. A short while after reaching the top the impact of all that effort hits me full in the face and I feel like I can't possibly carry on. I battle through it, spurred on in part by playing out in my head the conversation I'd have to have with Jon explaining why I'd given up. Things start to look bleak when I spot a road sign pointing me in the direction of Long Hill. Long Hill had better be heading downwards, I think, or I'm going to cry.

Long Hill is, as it turns out, a long and gentle decline. By now the pain has subsided and my stride is feeling good and strong. The miles start to tick by more quickly and everything starts to feel easy for the first time. By the tenth mile I'm starting to overtake people for the first time in the race. With the end in sight I'm even able to muster up something of a sprint finish, kicking through to claw back a few more places.

I cross the line in 1 hour 39 minutes, well ahead of my target and in the top 10 per cent of the competitors. My face muscles are just about the only ones in my body that aren't on fire, so allow myself to grin rather broadly.

After warming down I fire off a text message telling Jon my time. I get one back: "I thought you'd do sub 1:30". After a moment of horror, the competitive imp leaps out of its stretcher. I'll show him, it screams. Next time. You just wait.

Right to the last, Jon Denoris is effortlessly pushing my buttons. I guess that's what personal training is all about.

LINKS

Club 51

51 New Cavendish St
020 7258 8456
clubfiftyone.co.uk