



Working for Health

Professional Athlete

Presenter

Richard Neuraker, one of Britain's most successful long distance runners. He came 5th in the marathon at the 1996 Olympic Games and has now retired from competition.

Richard Neuraker

To cut a long story short I was a good schoolboy runner, not the best in the country, and I suppose it was towards the end of my first university degree that I reached national level and realised that I was good enough, if I continued to train hard, to make the national team. And that was in 1987 that I became aware of my potential. And, I suppose, from then on it was just a gradual process of first making the British team and then winning a national title and then going on to higher honours at world level. I suppose in the early days when you are making your breakthrough to get to national level and then to get onto the British team it's a very exciting time in your career because everything's new and things that previously you'd only dreamed about you're actually, you know, realising for yourself. In later years I suppose the sensation changes because it becomes much more a quest for fulfilment and I suppose there are more disappointments than there are, or as many disappointments as there are moments of intense satisfaction, - simply because you set yourself much higher standards. I've actually got out my training diary here because it isn't easy to say what a typical week's training is. My training does vary quite a lot from week to week and from season to season within any year. So on Monday I did a morning run which was 16 kms and I ran that in an hour and then in the afternoon I did a run of 11 kms and that took me about three quarters of an hour. On Tuesday I did a morning run of about 10 kms and that took me 40 minutes and then in the afternoon I did a track work out, a total distance of about ten miles but in that ten miles I was running twenty 400 metre repetitions. On Wednesday I did another 10 km morning run of 40 minutes and in the afternoon I did another 10 km run of 40 minutes. On Thursday morning I did a hill work out which meant that I went to a hill and I ran up it ten times as fast as I could and in the afternoon I did a relatively easy run of about 12 kms which took me just over 50 minutes. On Friday I did a brisk ten mile run, 16 kms, which took me just under an hour and in the afternoon I did a eight km easy run. On Saturday morning I did a tempo run of 20 minutes with a warm up and warm down and I had Saturday afternoon off. And then on Sunday morning I did a, what I call, a long run which was about 16, 17 miles which took me an hour and 50 minutes.

The most obvious problems related to over training are illness and injury. When you're competing and training at the level that I am and many elite athletes are then you're obviously pushing yourself to the limit and you're often wanting to discover new limits to your training and competitive capabilities. And when you're at that level, when you're at that limit then it's quite easy that you're going to break down unless you're very sensitive and sensible about, how your body is coping with the stresses that is being asked of it. I think for the elite athlete competitiveness is part and parcel of training and competition but, it has to be said, that not everyone who takes part in exercise has to be competitive. As an athlete, you're pushing yourself so hard and you're having to put up with quite a lot of pain and suffering in the course of training, not to mention the sacrifices that you're making in your lifestyle, that it's got to be worth it and for the non-elite athlete who takes part in exercise there can be lesser motivations but for the elite athlete the competitive drive is so central to their reason for being involved. Running is a great way to unwind to get rid of stresses in your life and I think I've found that personally and I know that so many other runners who I come into contact with would say the same. And I think the process that's involved there is that you go out the door for a run and you've got so many things on your mind but by the time you've come back from your run you've somehow let go of those thoughts or you've sorted them out they sort of

seem to be less important than they were previously if they've been bugging you, or something like that. And I think that is speaking about the subconscious workings of your mind when you're involved in exercise. So, I suppose that's one very obvious and immediate spiritual dimension to running that I've experienced and that I think I probably experience on a daily basis. And I can also say that on the rare occasions that I don't go out for a run I think I'm probably missing the run as much from that point of view as I am from the point of view of, you know, really pushing myself to the limit, which is perhaps another side another sort of satisfaction that you get from running. I think there's another spiritual dimension, if you like, to being involved in exercise. Some people would say that they can, when they go out for a run, they're in an environment in which they can pray in some sort of religious sense. Now, I'm not one of those athletes, to be honest. I mean, I do pray but I don't pray when I'm out running because I just find that I'm not very good at focussing on any one particular thought when I'm out running. My mind wanders a lot which actually is coming back to what I said at the start about letting go of a number of thoughts.