

Beating The Training Blues

By Bruce Tulloh

We've all been through it. It starts with a reluctance to change and get out of the door; it continues with a feeling of lethargy during the warm-up. Some days you manage to overcome it and get stuck into proper training, but on other days you just plod round your circuit feeling awful and wishing it was over. The most likely causes of this problem are overtraining and boredom.

Rest is important: if you don't give your body enough time to recover from the long, hard sessions you inevitably become run-down and depressed. If your training lacks variety, the boredom effect will wear you out mentally even before you are physically overtired.

The first remedy, therefore, is rest. How often do we read of runners who after a good run say, "The amazing thing is that I missed several days training last week, because I fell off my bike/had a cold...". A little rest will always do you good in the short term, and the harder you are training, the more benefit you will get from the time off. Even the most dedicated runner can afford to have one rest day every two weeks, and I recommend that you should have one easy week out of every four; the easy week should usually come when you are racing at the end of the week.

The next most important thing is having a real mental break. You can come back fresh and better able to see the way forward. Some international runners take two to four weeks off at the end of the track season. A lot of runners are scared of doing this because they think that they will suddenly become unfit, but it's unlikely that you'll do nothing physical during the break. If you ski or climb, or just walk along the beach, you will lose very little fitness in just two weeks and you should feel mentally refreshed and keen to get back to training.

Suppose you find it boring doing the same thing day after day? Maybe you're just in a rut, trying to beat times around the same old courses. You need to rethink your programme. Decide which races are important in the year and plan things around them. Don't be afraid to have periods where you are either on a 'minimum maintenance' programme – three short runs a week – or a 'no pressure' programme, where you just run for so many minutes a day, four, five or six days a week, without bothering about times or distances. When you're in serious training, consider introducing some new elements into your schedule – runs in new places or with different training partners. Introduce a new hill or track session. Consider doing weights, aerobics, swimming or mountain biking. If you're committed to doing long runs in marathon preparation, then plan to go somewhere different every couple of weeks. Get someone to drop you 10 miles from home so that you're not going over the same old ground.

Perhaps, though, the malaise goes deeper and cannot be cured just like that. You have to reconsider your reasons for running. First of all, do you really like running? If not, you'd better have some good reasons for doing it! Be honest with yourself. If you just like getting out into the open air, walking would be almost as good. If it's to keep fit and lose weight, a regime of swimming, cycling, aerobics and walking would achieve the same goal. If it's to have a break from work and meet people, you could take up line dancing.

If you are an obsessive lifetime runner like me, though, all these suggestions are totally irrelevant. The most likely reason for the blues is that you are going round the same circles and not improving. Are you frustrated because you can't achieve last year's times even though you're training harder? Write down your times for this year, last year and the year before. Can you really expect to be improving at every distance? Should you be thinking of concentrating more on one particular aspect of your running in which you can still improve? Are there events you haven't tried yet, or places you haven't been to? Is running as important to you as it used to be? If something in your personal life or your career has changed, running may not have such a high priority. You may just be going through the motions through force of habit, which is why it feels so hard. In this case the answer is to run just as much as you need to keep reasonably fit and not to worry about staying at the same level of performance.

Concentrate on doing the things you enjoy, not the things you think you ought to do. Enjoy the friendships of running – and worry less about the pace. Above all, think how many people would like to be able to run but are unable... and stop feeling sorry for yourself.