

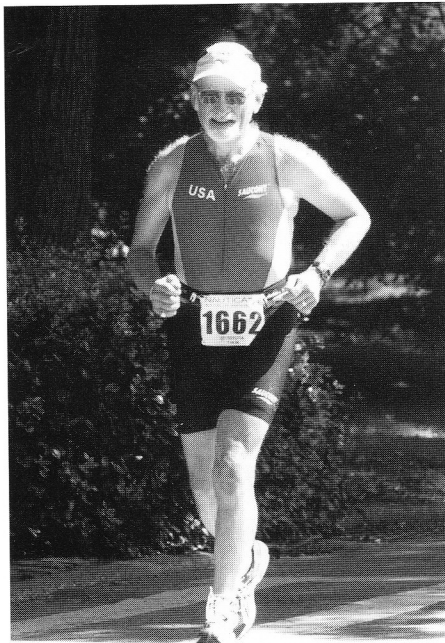
Talking About Training: Choosing a Coach

By Steven Jonas, MD, MPH, MS, FNYAS

With the new spring season upon us, I feel like, "Hey, I already started my spring season." But that was a year ago. I also have the feeling that I was just writing the "spring" column for this space. Ah well. I gather that having such thoughts is a natural part of aging; therefore, as long as I keep on thinking, writing, and racing, I'll just go with it. And so, in getting on with it, for *this* spring issue I'll include a word or two about coaches and coaching. You may have more than one athlete/patient who is thinking about getting a coach, not a personal trainer but a coach. If they ask you for advice on the matter, here are some thoughts about what to tell them.

First of all, you need to be sure you are on the same wave-length when talking about "coaching." Here is one definition that I like: "Coaching is an art and a science, the purpose of which is to provide advice, instruction, and motivation-enhancement for both thought and action, with the primary objective of *maximizing performance*, in the context of the person's goals." Bearing these concepts in mind, your patient can then decide if it is a coach that is indeed needed. If it is, it is obvious from this definition that the first task for your patient is goal-setting. Then he/she can move onto the task of choosing and hiring a coach.

Whether you are your own coach, as most of us are, or are engaging a professional, you need to know what your goals in your sport are before you can realistically and successfully set out to maximize performance. I suggest that your athlete spend some time thinking about and answering the following questions. Do you want to go faster? For what



purpose? Do you want to go longer? For example, if you are a middle-distance runner, are you getting ready to try that first marathon? If you are a triathlete who has been doing sprints, is the goal to do that first Olympic-distance race? In either example, *why* do you want to do that? Or do you want to improve technique, such as in swimming, without necessarily going either faster or longer (although better technique should equip you to do both)? Do you want individual or group coaching? The latter would provide even more benefits for those who thrive in group settings.

Coaches come with a variety of skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Answering the questions above will make it more likely that your athlete will choose a coach who is going to work for them, by working with them to meet your patient's and not the

coach's needs. Regardless of your patient's goals, the most important characteristic of a coach for individual sports is that they have the ability to understand the client. The good coach understands that the most important element of coaching is goal-setting by the client and not by the coach. In contrast with team sports where the primary goal is to win and the coach must make decisions based on that desired outcome, a coach in individual sports must listen to the client and make decisions based solely on the client's needs.

A good coach will say to a client, "What do you want to achieve? I will do my best to help you succeed." A good coach will *realistically* help a client define their goals, as well. They will present such thoughts as, "Do you think that that is really a good starting goal? Let's look at your time availability, your present physical status, your physical skills, and your genetic endowment. Maybe, at least for now, you should rethink that one about winning your age-group in a 5K or the 1500 meter swim. Given who you are right now, I am pretty sure that if you set that as your goal right now, you are going to have a difficult time reaching it, at least in this season." Although the good coach does not set goals for his/her client, the good coach should bring a strong dose of realism to the discussion of goals and guide the design of a training program suitable for each client.

A good client will be able to talk to his/her coach about what he/she is getting—and not getting—out of the program as they progress. If your patient reports that they don't seem to be communicating well with their coach, I suggest advising them to address issues directly with the coach, and if that doesn't produce the desired results, to switch coaches. Coaching can be very helpful for many athletes at all levels of ability and desire, as long as the right goals are set and the athlete and coach work together to achieve them in the right way.

Author's Note: This column shares certain text with a column of mine entitled "On Coaching" published in the Spring 2007 issue of USA-Triathlon Life. I write a regular column in this quarterly magazine under the head: "Triathloning for Ordinary Mortals™." The shared material is used with the permission of the editor.

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