

# Ignoring THE VOICES



In a perfect world, each training run would be perfect, the sun would be shining, you'd be strong and motivated and you'd feel the wind beneath your feet. But we all know that life isn't perfect and there are days when training is a struggle. Self-confessed 'plodder', LISA SCHOFIELD, goes hunting for the Holy Grail on how to keep going when you don't want to and in the process discovers that even our elite runners have their 'off' days, and some very simple solutions for getting through them.

WRITTEN BY LISA SCHOFIELD  
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DANIEL GREEN & JOHN HARDING

**Y**ou're out on a run, you're running well, you've still got gas in the tank, legs are strong, when you hear a quiet voice in your head, "You need to stop for a bit, take a break, have a stretch". You try and ignore the voices but they start to get a little louder, "you've run far enough. Why not walk for a bit? You can run again soon". You were going well only a little while ago, what's happening? Now the voices are incessantly screaming loudly in your head, "stop, give up, you're done, write this run off". So your jog becomes a shuffle, becomes a walk, becomes a defeat. The voices have won. Many people, who run, cycle, swim or do any kind of physical activity that requires a little fitness and stamina, hear those 'voices'. They are the voices inside your head that beg you to stop, that remind you fiercely of your perceived limitations that distract you from your focus and create noise in your mental stillness.

Regardless of the event or activity, whether it is a 5km run or a marathon, we all have self-doubt, and those internal voices that make us question ourselves. So how do you keep going when every ounce of you wants to stop?

Of course we're not talking about when you have an injury or an illness. Obviously medical advice and your own common sense have to prevail in these situations. We're talking about those flat days or bad days when you've had enough, you can't get moving or pulling on the running shoes is like pulling teeth, and you think of anything and everything to get out of it.

I'm a runner, albeit, an awkward plodder but I still do it because I love any kind of running – trail or road. I love the solitude; I love the sense of achievement. But I battle mentally sometimes especially on those training runs where all I want to be is at home, but home is still 10kms away, and I've had enough, when I fight it the whole way.

Sometimes, I get it right and it is just a relief to know I can. I ran the Motatapu Off-Road Marathon in New Zealand recently. It took me forever, it hurt and like most of the field, I started cramping mid-way, after the many cold river crossings on the stunning course. But inside my head I went, as I call it, 'neutral'. I didn't fight it, I didn't freak out at the distance ahead of me, instead I just kept moving without thinking. And every time I saw a distance marker I would give myself a pep talk, "32km? I can run 32km, I've done it before." I counted down; encouraging and reassuring myself like this at each marker. When I saw the 700m mark I was spent and emotional, yet still I said my mantra, "700m? I can run 700m, I'm going to do this, I'm actually going to do it". And I did.

But that was an event and we all know events are completely different than normal training runs. There is hype, there is an adrenalin buzz, there are supporters and there is an actual goal and end point.

The journey to get to the start line however, is harder and lonelier. For many this is when the mental challenge is at its toughest. Longer distances need to be covered over more days

in a week. There are plans, schedules and goals in place but on some days, for no rhyme or reason, reluctant fingers lace up shoes and the impetus needed is not quite as 'zingy'. What is needed on these days to keep you moving?

Pat Carroll, Australia's prominent online running coach, suggests that stopping shouldn't be an option. "If you let yourself stop, then you've just given yourself an 'out' for next time you feel like it", he says. "Don't give yourself the opportunity to stop. Everyone feels bad at some stage in a run; usually it's a case of just running through it until you feel better again. And you will."

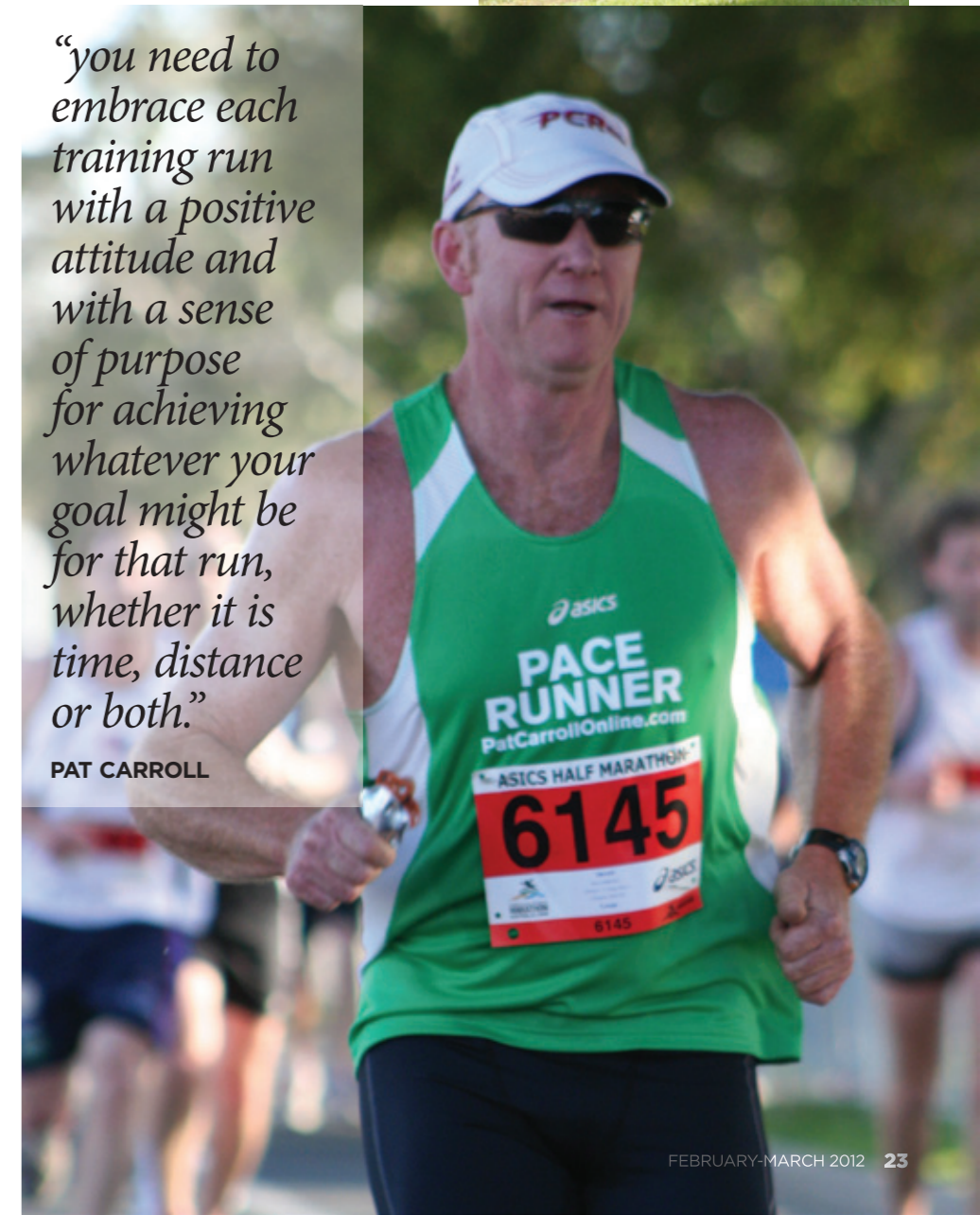
Lara Tamsett, currently one of Australia's best runners over 5000-10,000m agrees. "No matter how fit you are, running is painful for everyone, it's relative depending on your distance or effort", she explains. "I start each run or training session expecting to feel bad and I just push through it until I feel better. I know that if I stop, the guilt and disappointment in myself will be far worse, than



Each time Martin Dent races he lays his pride on the line.

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PAT CARROLL



the short-term pain I'm feeling from my training". Mental negotiation is a tried and trusted technique for Tamsett, when she's anticipating a tough day. "If I'm not feeling motivated I'll say to myself that once I get to halfway in a run, if I'm still feeling bad, and I really need to, then I can stop. But I never stop, because once I hit the halfway mark, I know I'm almost there. I can then count down the time or distance until I'm finished."

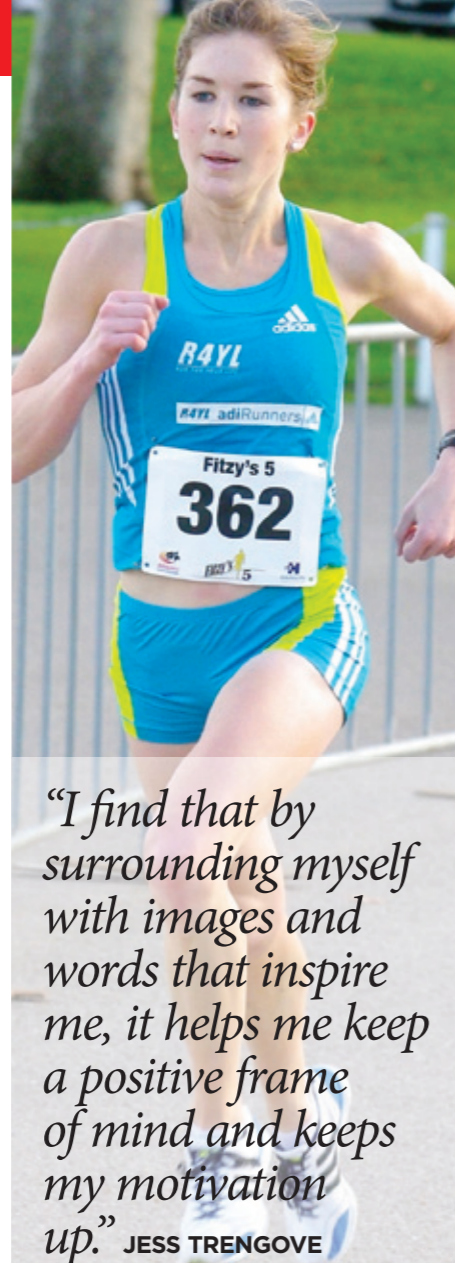
Tamsett knows that is she gives herself a mental 'get out of jail free' card, once she gets to halfway, she won't have to use it but it's enough to get her started, and that's all she needs.

Martin Dent, one of Australia's foremost road runners says, for him, there is no decision, "it's just a given that I'll be running, I give myself no choice". Like Carroll, Dent believes that if he gives in, it will be easier to give in next time and argues, "my pride is at stake as well, I don't want to have any regrets in my training or my races". In other words, the mental pain of giving up is worse than the physical pain of finishing.

Martin Fryer, currently one of Australia's premier ultra marathon runners, explains that when he's feeling flat and struggling to get motivated for a run, he knows once he is out there he will feel better, no exceptions. By not giving in to the temptation to not go on, he's just won a mental battle and will be mentally stronger, which will help prepare him for harder challenges in the next tough event. And for Fryer, a training run is not a typical of most runners. His training programs often require him to build to a peak training mileage which may mean two runs a day to reach a weekly target of 160-200km for the week.

But there is definitely a common theme for the elite runners that we can apply to all our levels of ability and training – continuing to train, when every ounce of you wants to stop, will actually make you tougher mentally and more resilient to harder challenges. It's almost as if the first steps you take are a mental victory, you won't give in next time and you'll be stronger as a result.

Carroll argues that for any runner, training is a dual process, "Long runs help you toughen up physically and mentally, you need



*"I find that by surrounding myself with images and words that inspire me, it helps me keep a positive frame of mind and keeps my motivation up."* JESS TRENGOVE



**Leonie Cheetham, owner and trainer of outdoor training group, Pinkfit, was inspired by reading, 'Running Within' (Jerry Lynch/Warren Scott), and sees running as a mind-body-spirit relationship. But as a trainer, she has pragmatic techniques to help her clients get through flat patches:**

- **Dig deep** and return to the big "why" it is you love running. This can be a timely reminder when you need a boost or dose of motivation.
- **Take your mind off your discomfort** by focusing on your running style – are you still running with the same good technique as when you started? Distract your mind and put it to use constructively.
- **Don't put too many expectations on yourself**, just relax and your body will relax with you.
- **Practice visualising positive outcomes** in your training or on your race. See yourself crossing the finishing line or achieving your time or distance goal.
- **Feed off another person's energy** – hang on to the person in front allowing them to 'pull' you along with them for a short distance and then back off and hang on to someone else.
- **Practice positively telling your body how you feel**, instead of, "I feel tired", tell yourself, "I feel strong".
- **Believe that you can and you will.** Simple, but it works.
- **Count strides to get you through a bad section** – the brain likes having something to do and before you know it, you're up the hill or nearer the finish. Do anything mental to keep the brain away from the message it's receiving about things getting tougher.
- **If you prefer company, run with a friend** at a similar level of ability or join a running group.
- **Run in different places, change your routes, change your terrain** – this keeps your runs interesting as well as provides different physical challenges.

to be strong in both". Carroll cites the scenario of runners who start counting down the time left on a run as soon as they've started, as if it is an endurance to be suffered rather than an experience to be enjoyed. "The attitude is all wrong", he says, "you need to embrace each training run with a positive attitude and with a sense of purpose for achieving whatever your goal might be for that run, whether it is time, distance or both".

**Embrace it, don't fight it**

In fact, it is just this philosophy that Carroll advocates to his clients. "If someone is feeling stressed about a run and needs to calm a situation down, I always tell them to say, "relax", over and over to themselves. The simple act of saying this will generally help achieve it".

For Tamsett, she draws on the competitive nature of her running to make her mentally tough. "I think to myself that pain is good because it's making me fitter, which is making me stronger, and therefore makes me more competitive for my races". She views the pain as a positive indicator of how she is improving herself and her competitiveness.

Like most elite runners, Martin Dent is strategic with his running. "I give myself small goals, like running the next 2km hard and then seeing how I feel", he says. "I think about my competitors and try to give the illusion of strength if I'm in a tough patch, they're none-the-wiser and I haven't compromised my form."

Jessica Trengove, winner of the women's section of Sydney's 2011 City2Surf, favours a more analytical approach as well. "I try to slightly 'up' my pace at regular points in my races. I break down longer races into small achievable challenges such as slowly chipping away at the person in front, which helps maintain my focus."

The desire to stop often stems from physical discomfort that feeds back into a negative mental state, explains Fryer. "If the mind dwells on this discomfort, you will follow a downward spiral. But I find that I can nip one of these episodes in the bud if I take time to do a focused, purposeful assessment of my form, and play around with it for a while as a sort of game and change-up."

In other words, instead of focusing on the negatives, do a little self-analysis, re-think your form, and experiment a little with your gait, posture or stride. By doing this not only do you move yourself out of that mental state but there is also the added benefit of actually improving your technique.

As for 'voices', Martin Fryer argues it's impossible to compete in the events he does without negative thoughts creeping in, questioning his ability to overcome the continuous pain and fatigue. In November 2011, Fryer achieved first in the 2011 Sri Chimnoy 6 day race in New York, by running 784kms on only 12 hours of total sleep. In fact he finds that these negative voices reappear at regular cycles over the course of an event, as new challenges arise. Nausea, fatigue, blisters, lack of sleep, motivation and often repetition are constants in Fryer's events.

Fryer has discussed his techniques for silencing the negative thoughts with R4YL previously (R4YL Issue 24). "I have three main inner voices that compete with each other in events", he explains, "The Scientist (Analytical/Calculating), The Hippy (Experiential/Expansive) and The Mongrel (Competitive/Survivalist)". In his early days of ultra marathon running, he used the Mongrel to get him out of 'holes' but he found that he couldn't sustain the energy needed for this voice, particularly over extended periods of running. And so The Hippy has evolved, a transcendental type of thinking, which he uses to mentally move him into almost a trance-like state in order to embrace the pain and fatigue. He may replay music in his head in short repetitions to

**ADVICE FROM OUR ELITE RUNNERS...**

- ☺ Don't letting stopping be an option – it will only make it easier to stop next time.
- ☺ Look at a run as an opportunity to have some mental time-out.
- ☺ Keep your attitude positive, you're making the choice to go for a run, make the most of it.
- ☺ Count down the kilometres until you've finished – it makes the sense of achievement even more fulfilling.
- ☺ "Relax", make this your mantra, calm down into your run, relax and enjoy what you are achieving.



According to Martin Fryer, by not giving into the temptation, you've already won a first mental battle.

*"Long runs help you toughen up physically and mentally, you need to be strong in both."* PAT CARROLL

create what he calls a "musical mantra of survival". Each of his inner voices plays an important and timely role at various stages during a run.

Trengove uses self-talk and visualisation before and during a race, "I have a few catchy phrases that I repeat in my head to stay positive and remove unhelpful thoughts", she says. She also uses motivational quotes and images around her home and in her training diaries, "I find that by surrounding myself with images and words that inspire me, it helps me keep a positive frame of mind and keeps my motivation up", she explains.

For Pat Carroll, the only voice he hears when he's running is his own as he solves issues, makes plans and reflects inwardly. "We all have busy lives. How often do you get the chance to be by yourself and to just think your own thoughts?"

Tamsett agrees; she sees her training runs as an opportunity to tune out, sort through problems and have a mental break. So looking at it this way, a run can provide mental therapy as well as physical training, which has to be a 'win-win'.

These elite runners have all accomplished superhuman achievements but the reality is they are just like you and I. They have good days, flat days, bad days and often, incredible days. But what they also have, which may differ from us, is they have the techniques both physical and mental, for pulling themselves through to greatness. These gems of wisdom are not rocket science, but they are wise, and they have worked. The evidence is in their results.

If you are having a tough patch, remember that you're not alone and that this can be just a temporary 'blip', that with a little mental tenacity, you can pull yourself through too.

**Further information:**

- [www.patcarroll.com.au](http://www.patcarroll.com.au)
- [www.christiesym.com](http://www.christiesym.com)
- [www.pinkfit.com.au](http://www.pinkfit.com.au)



Lisa competing in last year's Sydney Morning Herald Half Marathon.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR...**

As a keen runner, **LISA SCHOFIELD**, has completed two off-road marathons, Oxfam Trailwalker and other smaller events. Although Lisa loves to participate she knows that she'll never be at the level as the elite runners she was lucky enough to interview for this article. But for Lisa, it's all about "being out there and giving it a go". A kiwi happy to be living on the gorgeous northern beaches of Sydney, Lisa is mother of 3 boys, a freelance writer, a mad keen blogger and an avid reader of R4YL. She's pulling on her swimmers and taking herself out of her comfort zone to swim in the 2012 Cole Classic Ocean swim, before a year of running with the Sydney Marathon and the Speights Coast to Coast 2013 on her radar. Lisa can be found at her blog; [www.givingbackgirl.blogspot.com](http://www.givingbackgirl.blogspot.com) Twitter: @LisaSchofield2



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