

CONTENTS

Introduction	
Chapter 1 Los Angeles	1
Chapter 2 Los Angeles Reaction	13
Chapter 3 Early Days	20
Chapter 4 Gateshead	35
Chapter 5 I Nearly Died	49
Chapter 6 Beer Drinker's Guide to Sports Psychology	73
Chapter 7 Boston	87
Chapter 8 Athens and Brisbane	107
Chapter 9 Houston and London	124
Chapter 10 Olympic Training	140
Chapter 11 Sitting in the Road to Seoul	147
Chapter 12 Progress of Training	171
Chapter 13 What Hope Olympic Medals?	185
Chapter 14 Be Careful What You Dream	197
Appendix	205

INTRODUCTION

Talent is the key to high performance, or so you might think. I won a Bronze medal in the Olympic marathon, but I was definitely not one of the three most talented distance runners in the world. I was a talented runner compared to the average runner, but you don't run against average runners in an Olympic final. Among that elite group of people I was not particularly talented. So how did I win a medal?

Most people believe our level of performance should be the same as our level of talent, assuming we have trained properly for our event. But have you ever had a bad day, a really bad day when you performed well below your level of talent? That straight line between talent and performance can be bent downwards by circumstances.

I believe that if you can bend it down on a bad day, you can also bend it up. I believe that on occasions you can create the circumstances in which you can perform at a higher level than your talent says you can. This is one of the beauties of sport. This is what makes the outcome of every event uncertain. This is what gives the underdog his hopes and dreams. This is why sport brings passion and excitement to our lives.

This book has taken a couple of decades to write. I have written it in the little bits of spare time I could find in the life of

a husband and father, and the demands of work and running a business. I have written it for three reasons. Firstly, for the same reason I ran; to see if I could do it and try to reach that goal no matter how long it took. Secondly, I hope there is someone who may read something in my story which helps them in the same way that I improved, thanks to the help and advice of others. Last, but not least, I have enjoyed writing it; and I hope that somebody somewhere enjoys reading it.

CHAPTER 1

LOS ANGELES

As I walked from the bus to the gymnasium at the Santa Monica College Stadium, I saw the white Olympic flag with its five coloured rings hanging limply in the hot sunshine. The temperature inside the gym was much lower than outside, but the cooler air was filled with simmering anxiety as 107 nervous men checked in for the Los Angeles Olympic Marathon.

I sat on the floor to pin number 396 to my British running vest, and I watched Boston marathon winner and American record holder, Alberto Salazar, stretching. Next to him former Olympic medallist Rod Dixon of New Zealand was chatting to my British team-mate Geoff Smith. Geoff had run the fastest time by a Briton for several years when he finished second to Rod in New York. Juma Ikanga and Gidamis Shahanga, silver and gold medallists from the Commonwealth Games, were jogging slowly around the room. Toshihiko Seko, who had been undefeated at the marathon for five years, listened intently to his coach, along with his Japanese teammates. Everyone else either stared at the floor or gazed at Carlos Lopes, the Portuguese double World Cross Country Champion, and Rob de Castella, the reigning World Marathon Champion.

The media experts had all proclaimed this to be the best marathon field ever assembled; but as they eagerly awaited the race, some of the runners were suffering torment during the final hour of waiting. They were filling up with awe for the occasion and the opposition, and with fear for the distance and heat they were about to endure. Some stared blankly into the distance, while others talked incessantly about their training, races and injuries. Some were motionless but others jogged and moved continually. The room was shaded and cool, but the air was charged as if a thunderstorm was about to erupt.

My anxiety level was increasing rapidly as the ultimate challenge of an Olympic marathon came closer and closer. My mind was racing and my stomach was churning. I was on the verge of losing control. I needed to get back in control, and quickly. I walked outside onto the track where the race would start. The heat from the August sunshine was intense, and it didn't make sense to stay there long, but I had to compose myself, which is something I do best when I am alone. Nobody else was crazy enough to stand out in the sunshine, so I had the solitude I needed.

I took some deep breaths and started talking to myself. When I was inside the gym I was looking at all those great runners and thinking, 'How am I going to beat him and him and him?' But now that I was outside and alone I started to think differently, 'I have prepared for this race as well as I can. Today is the day. This is the biggest race of my life and I believe I am ready to run the greatest race of my life. Nobody else can stop me from running my greatest race, and if I do it, I am going to beat a lot of them.' I started to feel in control, and with that feeling came more confidence, and on top of that came some inspiration. 'I know I am going to run better than ever, and because I have never done that before I don't know how good it could be. All the best runners are here today, which means

that with one brilliant performance I could beat all the greatest marathon runners in the world. I just need to do it once in my life to beat them all. All these guys being here isn't a problem, it's an opportunity. A fantastic, wonderful opportunity!

By changing the situation from a problem to an opportunity, I changed my frame of mind from confused to focused and positive. When I walked back into the relative cool of the gymnasium I looked at Lopes, de Castella, Salazar, Seko and all the others, and I realised that this was indeed the precise moment for me to produce the performance of my life. I still felt extremely nervous, but I was no longer scared. I just wanted to get on with it.

When it was time to go back out into the sunshine and heat, I jogged a lap of the track with a very positive frame of mind. After a long drink of water, I ran a few gentle strides and tried to ignore my churning stomach. As we were called to the starting line I tipped two cups of water over my head to soak my hair and shoulders. With cold water dripping down my back I lined up in the third row beside John Treacy, who, like Lopes, had been the World Cross Country Champion twice.

The race started with two and three-quarter laps of the track, which was very crowded on the bends in the middle of a bunch of 107 runners. The running was a little more relaxed on the road outside the stadium, but the tension remained high as the crowds along both sides of the road bombarded us with noise. I have never known such excitement at a road race; the Angelinos were proud of hosting the Olympics and they were excited about the marathon.

The first few miles were a little uncomfortable as I tried to settle into a rhythm and adjust my bodily systems to running 26.2 miles in 85 to 90 degrees of heat. I was content to run in the midst of the group, and just get a few miles behind me. I started to feel better, as if things were in equilibrium, by about

four miles, just as we turned onto San Vicente Boulevard. This was one of the most crowded sections of the course, and the noise was deafening. By chance, I found myself running beside the media's pre-race favourite and World Champion, Rob de Castella. For some reason I decided to show him how relaxed I was, as if he cared, by having a chat with him.

I said, 'Noisy, isn't it?' to which he replied, 'What?' which rather proved my point. And that, verbatim, is the entire extent of the conversations I had during the whole race.

The Dutchman and European Champion, Gerard Nijboer, had tried some early pace setting, but now abandoned it for an easier ride in the pack. I had slowly moved closer to the front and we were all running slightly downhill towards the Pacific Ocean in a large, tightly grouped bunch as we passed 10 kilometres in 31 minutes and 15 seconds, which is even paced schedule for a finishing time of 2 hours 11 minutes and 40 seconds. This was good steady running, but not spectacular, which was exactly what I was hoping for on such a hot day. I was concentrating on staying relaxed, running efficiently and finding whatever shade there was from the direct glare of the sun. My plan was to get as far into the race as possible for the least amount of energy expenditure, in the hope that I would have something left for the closing stages.

It was all going just the way I wanted until we turned on to Ocean Drive and Ahmed Ismail of Somalia forged ahead, running the seventh mile in 4 minutes 45 seconds. I decided to be smart, and just let him go. Running so fast so soon in this heat had to be crazy, and I was sure he couldn't possibly keep it up. A group of other African runners, who all loved to run at the front, thought otherwise, and decided to follow him. Ikangaa was one of those runners, and as soon as de Castella realised that Ikangaa was pulling away, he neatly stepped out of the pack and gave chase.

The race was suddenly changing and I had to make a decision. Should I continue with my sensible even pace, or should I get up to the front? I really had no choice. An hour earlier I had told myself that if I ran the greatest race of my life, I could fulfil my wildest dreams. I couldn't possibly let such a talented group get away. I had to abandon caution and seize my opportunity. I accelerated and worked my way back towards the leaders.

I was six seconds behind Ismail and Ikangaa at 15 km, with a time of 46:06. I had covered the previous 5 km in a dangerously fast 14 minutes 51 seconds, but I was on the back of the leading group, and everyone behind me was effectively out of the race from that point on. Geoff Smith and Alberto Salazar either didn't or couldn't go with that surge, and their Olympic dreams were already over. We had just turned onto Pacific Boulevard when we passed 10 miles in 49:35, and from here the course was either flat or uphill all the way to the Coliseum.

Somalia's moment of Olympic glory came to an end as Ismail faded from the scene, and drifted back to finish 47th. The pace setting was taken up briefly by Nijboer, and then by Joseph Nzau of Kenya. I was content again to maintain my position and concentrate on picking the shortest route. Nobody seemed keen to commit himself, so the pace slackened slightly and a dozen of us formed a tightly knit group.

We passed 20 km in 61:26, having run 30:11 for the second 10 km. We reached half way in just under 65 minutes, with Ikangaa and Nzau in the lead, and I ran just behind them. I was feeling comfortable. (Comfortable is a relative term of course: I was comfortable compared to how I might have felt at this stage of a marathon, run in 85 degrees.) I knew I was running really well. I felt strong, and in control. I had beaten Ikangaa in the London Marathon and I felt I could do it again. Now that we had passed half way my confidence was growing,