

HOW LITTLE VOICES CAN AFFECT US ALL IF WE LET THEM

The perfect athlete story is one of a person who progresses in their sport, then something serious happens in their life which is pretty dramatic. It might be cancer, a car accident, a smashed back or whatever. They go through that – facing adversity and the end of a career – but end up coming back and triumphing... winning the Tour De France like Lance Armstrong, who fought back from cancer to win the great cycling classic in 1999. That is the perfect story, the stuff of wonderful documentaries or movies.

Most athletes don't go through such obvious adversity. They face what is in many ways a much more difficult adversity, in my view: the daily challenge of compromise. That's the little voice that speaks to us all. On Sunday night, the decision is made, I'm a bit behind in my work. "I'm going to get up at 4.30 in the morning and get stuck into it." At 4.20 in the morning the little voice tells you: "that's ridiculous. Why do you want to get up today? You can always do it tomorrow. It's not that urgent anyway."

It's that little compromise that comes into your mind. And it's a universal experience: everybody identifies with the "little voice," everyone understands it. If you ever got a person who was able to beat the little voice on every occasion, they'd be the most boring person in the world – all human frailty would be gone. But in the area where you wish to be above the ruck, where you aim to get the very best out of yourself... in that area you can't allow the little voice to win on any one occasion. As soon as you allow the little voice to win, even once, there's a crack in the infrastructure.

It's the constant battle you face in training sessions. It might happen 100 times in a session... might be a 1000... as a matter of fact it's almost continuous. It's the battle that no one else can see, the little voice, so logical and so rational and telling you to ease off a little bit...

In my view that really is where the champion is made. If I had to put my finger on one thing, it's that. Over the years, I haven't found the top athletes any stronger than anyone else. But somewhere within them is that understanding that the little compromise that seems so negligible is in fact a huge compromise. Maybe it's that the general population continues to see it as a "little" compromise. The champion refuses to see it that way.

You can rationalize it, and give in. No one else knows anyway – and you can always convince yourself that that was a reasonably intelligent thing to do. You can walk away feeling pretty cool about it. In fact, you just made a shocking decision.

Like everyone, I lived with it throughout my career. And in fact it reared up in the 1500 final in Rome, 1960. Strategically, Percy (who was my Coach) and I had worked out the best way for me to run in Rome – remembering that I felt vulnerable because I started my training late and was running well outside world-class times six weeks before the Games. We talked about whether that meant I should change my race strategy or whether we should keep to normal strategy – which was to try and hit the front about the halfway mark and then burn ‘em off. We decided, yes, that was still the best strategy to follow.

Anyway, we got to the halfway mark and I still can remember the white line, the finishing line, going under my feet and thinking: Two laps to go, this was the moment. I guess that I like most other people, would have thought that, at that moment, I’d have a voice inside me saying “this is your moment. This is the time that you’re going to establish your superiority... show these guys a clean pair of heels, leave ‘em behind... show ‘em what you’re made of... give yourself the opportunity after all the work you’d put in the last four years” etc etc.

And a voice did come into my head, but it said: “you’re bugged! Instead of getting all these positive, strong messages, I got this negative message. And it was the cool logical voice that talks to every single one of us that was happening in my head in the middle of the race. It said to me “You’re bugged... look, you didn’t expect to feel this tired at this particular point, so why go to the front now? Why not wait another lap? Stay where you are in fourth position, and wait until the bell goes. “You’ve still got plenty of time to win this thing.”

Because, in my training, I had practiced over and over again, ignoring the voice, either through visualization or the device of the competitor on my shoulder or whatever – because I’d practiced a million times – it was impossible for me to give into. Instinctively, I just kept going.

But it was a moment of choice – and it surprised the hell out of me that there it was. As a kid I probably thought if you trained hard and ruthlessly and intensely over a long period of time that eventually that voice would go away. That was sheer and utter proof to me that in our life it never leaves us... it’s always there, it’s always challenging you, it’s always looking for the easy way to do things.

Anyhow, I ignored it – because I ignored it I got to the front and ended up breaking the world record, winning the race by a record margin and won a gold medal – in a time that would have won seven out of the last ten Olympic Games. I got a street named after me in Sydney Olympic Park and I’m a “legend” and all that stuff ... and it probably would never have happened if I had listened to that voice. I might still have won it – but it would have been just another 1500 metres gold-medal win.

The message I pass on to people is that the champion has to confront the voice as much as anybody else has to. It never goes away. For every single one of us it’s always there and it’s logical, and we have to deal with it. If you ever want to be really good at something you have to accept the fact that it’s always going to be there and it’s going to be very compelling – but somehow or other you have to constantly ignore it and not compromise because of it. Then you will advance.

Just to finish off, I would like to tell you another short story about Herb Elliot. Merv Lincoln and I were very fierce rivals. Franz Stampfl trained with a passion, and had a journo mate on the Sporting Globe who shared Percy's hatred – so every opportunity to attack Stampfl – and Lincoln – was taken. And vice versa. There was this antagonistic environment built up. The press loved it. Merv and I were not friends at that point. I would maybe give him a desultory handshake after a race – that was all.

This particular day, I turned up for training at Olympic Park. I very rarely trained at the track where I was to race. The track to me was the examination room – and I only wanted to get there for the exam. It was the boxing ring, the gladiatorial place... I didn't want to train there. It was a special place where I gave my all – and where every thing was on the line. I felt a need to retain a "specialness" about where I was going to race. But this time, I had decided a week before that I was going to train at Olympic Park on this particular night.

It was forty degrees Celsius that day, with a strong north wind, sending the dust swirling around Melbourne. The city was stinking – and most of the athletes who trained at Olympic Park had decided they wouldn't train that night. It was too hot – and a cool change was coming overnight and they'd be able to do a far better and more useful training session tomorrow. For them, the little voice rationalised the whole thing.

As I recollect, there were only two of us at the track: Lincoln and me. I had decided to do a training session where I ran flat out – 100 per cent effort on one side of the track, about 120 metres – then jogged the other side, then sprinted, jogged and so on. Lincoln was doing much the same sort of training session.

I remember thinking: Isn't it extraordinary, with all of the circumstantial things that influence people's lives, and here we are – we've come to this one place at the one time when all of the rational people have decided not to train - and we've chosen to do the same training session.

But then I realized our training sessions were absolutely, totally different. He had chosen to do his sprints with the wind behind him and I had chosen to do my sprints with the wind in my face. And I remember thinking: Why is this guy looking for the soft option? He'll never beat me – because I'm not looking for soft options. I want the tough option, because it's going to make me grow.

I realised that those little compromises were the things that were going to make a difference between being a winner and being a loser. I don't think he realized what a huge decision he'd made, that it wasn't just the simple decision: Tonight I'm going to run with the wind. The actual decision he made, without realizing it, was: I don't want to be a winner.

His decision to train (at all on such a day) had turned him into an elite athlete, but it hadn't turned him into a winner.

As told by Herb Elliott

Source Winning Attitudes by Hardie Grant Books