

View From The Coaching Couch

by Andy Mouncey

Why & What

'So why me?' I asked Peter when he first made contact in July 2012.

'I found you on the Montane website,' came the reply 'you've done the long stuff – I haven't – and I liked what I read.'

OK so far.

'And what do you want from this?'

'A good relevant plan so that I have activity with purpose, reassurance that I'm doing the right stuff, and I want you to ensure I do my homework.'

Still good.

'And your expectations of me?'

'Be direct, give me technical advice and share the lessons of your experience.'

I gave Peter some pre-start homework to make sure he was serious, followed it up with some searching questions, agreed the ground rules of our coaching relationship and fired off the contract. It came back signed: we were off.

The Coaching Process

The coaching happened over thirteen 45 minute skype calls between August 2012 and March 2013. The key parts were the pre-start set-up and the post-event reflection: The latter because this is where the key lessons were – crucial for Peter to be clear on so he could build on these for the future.

Write It Down Make It Real

I kept a mind-map record of all our calls partly because I knew I'd need a record of progress if at some point Peter had a loss of confidence/momentum and found himself staring into the abyss. Reminding someone how far they have come and the progress they have made is a sure-fire way of getting back on track – it's just that usually it needs someone else to point that out.

What & Why (Again)

Peter's goals for the race were, with one exception, all about the journey/process: Enjoy it, race with confidence, be in control of my pace. These were all things he could control – as long as he had the skills and motivation to do so. I designed our coaching process to ensure that this was indeed the case. His only 'outcome' goal was to achieve a finish. This was by no means certain as there were plenty of factors outside his control that could affect his chances. My role was to help him make his peace with this in advance, and put his faith and skills in controlling the factors he could control.

As to the 'why' of it all, in my experience this is key. It is the anchor that keeps people on track when stuff goes wrong: Those who have a compelling answer to why am I doing this? are far more likely to stay the course when it get tough. My job was to ensure that Peter's 'why?' was compelling enough.

Start Simply To Great Effect

With one exception Peter set the agenda for the calls. I'd question, check and challenge moving between coach and mentor mode, (yes, there is a difference*). I wanted to give Peter a sense of making progress quickly and easily: My pre-start material is designed with this in mind, and our first coaching session drove this home. His realisation at the end of that call – I've been over-analyzing it: I'm leaps and bounds ahead already – was exactly the response I was looking for: We'd established momentum, Peter was now an advocate for the process, and reassured that I really did know my stuff.

*Coaching

The coach is not the subject expert. Process and structure is followed and questioning is used to take a client towards a specific goal.

Think I'm OK as a person, I want more/faster – and this is what I want.'

Mentoring

The coach is the subject expert. The approach is teaching, telling, advising – filling in the knowledge gaps because the coach has been where the client wants to go. (Source: The Performance Partnership).

Needs Analysis

We conducted this for the event and then played compare/contrast with Peter's personal strengths. Where there were gaps we filled 'em, and where there was alignment we built on it: This was the basis for the Training Plan.

New Stuff

I introduced Peter to hiking, biking, gym work and mini-training camps right from the start.

Hiking (under load) and biking as part of his Strength Plan, gym work for postural integrity, form and function, and mini camps as a way of getting the most out of his training time by using back to back sessions to get him used to getting out there again and again as tiredness builds – oh, and practicing the skills of thinking clearly under pressure!

Reducing The Faff Factor

We both knew that when Peter was out there solo, at night in freezing cold with a number of days behind him already, simplicity would equal effectiveness – and a surefire way to get to simplicity was through being very well organised. A way to get to that was to replicate as many of the conditions as we could on a smaller scale in a tame environment. Solo wild overnight camps close to home – or even on the front lawn(!) - between time on feet outings became our test tube of choice.

Picking Up Peter

At the end of November Peter had a big loss of momentum and a huge dip in confidence brought on by a bunch of stuff happening at the same time in his real world that drew on most of his time and energy. This was the only time I took charge of our agenda. The solution was to go back through our records and construct a Position Check which I scripted and

read to him in the first person/present tense. I used this to reaffirm his personal strengths and qualities and the key lessons of the last 4 months. This reminded him of how far he'd come, what a special experience this was going to be, and that there really was still time to make even more progress.

The Crown Jewels: Scenario Planning

Peter was clear that this was the thing that made the biggest difference: A template in which he listed the key scenarios he anticipated he'd face during the event, and his planned response under the headings Think-Say-Do. This gave him a three dimensional race plan which he used to practically and mentally rehearse – and this meant that when he got out to Yukon very little surprised him.

Post Event Review

This is crucial for pulling the entire process and experience together and giving context and meaning. The headings we used were:

- Describe the event (one word answers)
- What did you enjoy most
- How did reality compare to expectations (the coaching and the race)
- What did you learn

Peter's Perspective

Andy's coaching was so valuable, faultless actually and gave me much more than I expected – for example the postural work in the gym and the Scenario Planning exercise. I got to actually look forward to my overnight camps! I went into the race with confidence – mental, physical and with my planning – and my confidence grew and grew as the race went on. It's a thinking mans' race and he helped direct my thinking to where it mattered. The result? I really enjoyed it!

Andy specializes in coaching ultra-marathon runners and triathletes, in person and by telephone, so that their training has balance and their race performance becomes more consistent.

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