

Career Path: 5 Things I Learned About Quitting From 20 Years of Running

Career Development



Running no doubt changed my life, almost all for the positive. Probably the most important thing I learned is "**Do Not Quit**." I am aware this is easy for me to say and not always easy to do. Further, the basic rule does not apply in all situations. So let's explore the boundaries a bit.

I give some personal examples below to illustrate my points. I don't want you to think I am bragging, so let me add this: I am a completely average runner. I started out back of the pack, and through years of diligent effort, I have clawed my way up to the middle of the pack. This is not about how awesome I am or about winning races. This is about learning what you are capable of, and how exploring your boundaries can help you in other areas of your life.

If you'd like reinforcement from an elite athlete, check out Lex Fridman's interview with Zach Bitter. Zach set the 100-mile running world record in 2019. I listened to the podcast just after I wrote this, and the overlap gave me goosebumps.

1. You can do more than you think

One key reason not to quit is that you can accomplish great things if you keep going. You almost always can do more than you initially think. Each time you stretch yourself and prevail, you realize your capabilities are greater than you suspected. And still, you can do more than you think.

My first tortured kilometer on a treadmill at the gym is a vivid memory. I recall asking myself how on earth people ran regularly and, more importantly, why? I remember talking with friends who were runners and being agog that people not only ran marathons, but ran them more than once. I now know so many inspiring stories of people starting from nothing and going on to accomplish great things. I've seen it happen enough times to know that you can do more than you think.

Often we quit because we are afraid of failure. We are afraid of finding out that we cannot do more

than we think, that we in fact will fall short of our expectations. That is fear talking. While fear has its place, you do not need to let it hold you back from finding out how much you can do.

2. Your mind plays tricks on you, frequently

Another reason not to quit is that when you are doing something hard, particularly exercise, your mind starts to play tricks on you. It says things like, "Why are you doing this to yourself?" and "You don't need to be working so hard. Just take it easy."

And those are only the mildly harmful thoughts. You might catch yourself thinking self-defeating things like "I'm no good at this anyway. Who am I fooling?" or "You look ridiculous. Stop now before someone sees you."

It can help to remember that this reaction is largely just biology: Your body is an amazing machine, and one of the things it does well is conserve energy whenever possible. If your brain detects that you are doing something strenuous that is not tied to a fight or flight response, it will use every trick to get you to stop it.

I've gotten so I recognize now when the biology brain is the one talking to me. In a marathon, it's around kilometer 10. An alarmed voice starts up, having noted that, "Yes, the damned fool does seem to have in mind to run another 32 kilometers. We better talk some sense into him now!"

Knowing that your monkey mind is trying to trick you, feel free to laugh at its feeble attempts and ignore this defeating self-talk. Focus on anything else for a few minutes, and the voice usually goes away without so much as a whimper.

3. Overcoming obstacles makes you stronger

Some of the happiest, most resilient people I know are the ones who have first made themselves seriously uncomfortable in the context of a fitness challenge. Persevering and prevailing against long odds is immensely rewarding. You have the satisfaction of overcoming the challenge itself. You also realize that you can do what you set your mind to do.

Moreover, when you overcome obstacles, you add to the list of things you know you can do. The more you do, the more you realize you can do. If you quit before you have overcome a challenge, you miss a chance to learn sooner how strong you are.

When I first set about righting the course of my sedentary ship, I set myself a goal of running a marathon. Considering my ignominious start with the one kilometer treadmill, this was ambitious. My first short race several months later was not auspicious: I read the event information wrong and showed up at the expected finish time, after the race was over. Eventually of course I did complete a marathon. Knowing I could run a marathon was a serious confidence booster. From that moment on I felt stronger, and because I felt stronger, I was.

4. Quitting (or not) is habit-forming

It's easy to overlook this point, but I consider it one of the most important on the list. We are creatures of habit. We are what we frequently do, more than we realize. Habits can be things you do, or things you don't do. Either way, your habits will strongly influence the course of your life.

Once you realize the vital role habits play, you can work their magic to your own ends. You can choose to adopt new habits, and so drive long-term outcomes with simple, short-term actions. Because they are so easy to form, and so powerful once formed, habits are the closest thing to a super-power that are available to us ordinary people.

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The danger with giving up, giving in, or taking it easy, **even just this one time**, is that you are creating a pattern, or let's say the possibility of a pattern. Are you the kind of person who will give in to pressure? Are you the kind of person who will give up when the path gets rocky? Guess what, if you have *ever* done so, you are the kind of person who *has* done so.

The context will fade after a while, and you may forget the reasons why, but you will not forget that you quit. The next time you are suffering, the next time you have the doubting self-talk, you will be challenged that much harder not to give in. In contrast, if you have never given in, if you have never quit, then you are the kind of person who does not quit. And that makes it much easier not to quit.

I saw this phrase on an athlete's shirt one time at an Ironman, and it sums up the message well: “Tough times don't last. Tough people do.”

Think of yourself as a tough person, and you will be (or become) one. In practical running terms, this means you run when it rains, you run when it's hot, you run when it's cold, you run uphill, you run downhill, you run when you are sore and tired, and sometimes even when you are sick. Be very careful giving yourself an exemption, because your biology brain is just waiting to regain the upper hand and make you stop.

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One important caveat: The more strongly you ingrain this habit, the greater will be your risk of ignoring a real reason to stop, and not just fear or doubt or self-defeating thoughts. Very rarely, an athlete will continue in the face of a medical problem or an injury, and so cause lasting damage. As you think yourself tough, make sure not to think yourself stupidly impervious.

That said, you can still do more than you think, even when you are hurting. I've run a marathon two weeks after coming down with the flu (miserable). I've run a marathon with a broken rib (didn't notice until it was over). However, speaking from experience:

- When you've not just sprained but broken your ankle, stop running;
- If you are suffering from heat stroke, stop running;
- When your sports drink freezes during your run, run faster;
- If it is pitch black and the path is strewn with debris, wear a headlamp or wait till morning.

5. Never give up

The more I realized I could do more than I realized, the more I wanted to do. When I learned to ignore biology brain and monkey mind, I overcame more obstacles. I became stronger and because this felt good, I wanted to do more. "Do not quit" became "just keep putting one foot in front of the

other," which I think is a useful motto for life.

That motto helped me achieve some things non-runners may care little about, but which changed my life:

- Running at least one marathon a year every year since I started running, racking up over 40,000 kilometers so far.
- Completing five ultras, including a 100K, which really tested me on points 1 and 2.
- Running every single day for eight months and 3,000 kilometers, a little over 12K a day.

Was any of this strictly necessary? Not at all. Was some of it slightly crazy? No doubt. But I tell you the halo effect of the running habit encouraged me to feel I could be strong in other areas of life.

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Professionally and personally, I am guided by the mantra "**Never give up**." I was going to say that if I set out to achieve a goal, I think to myself "I will do it or die trying." But then you'd think I think I've become stupidly impervious after all. So let me say clearly that I do not reach all my goals, and sometimes I call a voluntary halt to my pursuits.

But I reach for outrageously ambitious things, I do not let my fears and my doubts dictate my actions, I let my past accomplishments give me confidence in my abilities, and I tell myself that I am the kind of person who does not quit.

Tell yourself the same, and you may surprise yourself with how much you accomplish.

Be well.

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