



Avoid the 10 biggest running mistakes I made

Some of these mistakes cost me a tonne of time and motivation and caused me to stop running altogether at some points. You don't need to go through the same experiences and learn the hard way.

You have to learn from your own mistakes right? Well yes and I encourage you to reframe any failed running experience as a learning opportunity. However, that doesn't mean you have to make every mistake to learn. In fact it is far better to learn from other people's mistakes if you can. It will save you time and demotivating experiences.

Today I will reveal to you some horrible moments in my running career. These are not moments I am proud of, but eventually I managed to use them as learning experiences and take my running to a higher level as a result.

And if this guide can help you to avoid the same mistakes and contribute to you hitting your goals faster then it justifies that pain even more.





#1

Not training properly for a race

I ran my first marathon in 2003. I followed the training plan and I executed the race as best I could with my limited experience. I was very pleased with my time but over the next 2 years I forgot all the hard work that went into that marathon.

In 2005 I signed up for my second marathon. However, this time I was arrogant and thought because I had completed one marathon, a second would be easy. I arrived at the start line under trained and under prepared.

Things were getting tough at only 6 miles in (see point 2!) and I struggled on to 16 miles at which point my Mum passed me and knowing the last 10 miles would hurt like hell, I gave up. This is still my only DNF (Did Not Finish) to date and it is still painful to think about.

Maybe I should have mustered the willpower to keep going and finish whatever the time but the truth is there was no reason to be in that position in the first place. I simply didn't put the work in when it was required.

I had a similar experience in 2014 when I ran my first half marathon though there were somewhat mitigating circumstances. My Mum had passed away the month before and my brother and I ran the race in her memory at short notice.

I did two training runs, a 6 miler and an 8 miler and sure enough I was complaining to my brother for the last 5 miles. He had to drag me round it listening to me wailing 'I can't do this!'. Highly embarrassing when I think about it now but the key message is this:

Your lack of training will be found out on race day!



#2

Starting too fast in a race

Oh if I had a pound for every time I have done this then I might not quite be rich, but I may be closer to investing in a pair of Nike 4% shoes. I'll admit this is a hard one to judge sometimes as you want to race on the edge of your capability. But if you shoot too far over you are in for a world of pain.

I have had some fairly spectacular blow ups because I went way over what I was capable of. The marathon in 2005 was a double fail. My brother Phil was running his first marathon. Fitter but also less experienced than me, he decided to go off at a crazy pace. (This was back in the days when we didn't have running watches so I can only guess that it felt like 10k pace).

I stupidly and stubbornly decided I would not be beaten by my little brother and held onto him for 6 miles by which time I felt like I was done with another 20 to go. I DNF-ed and Phil blew up badly, probably at least an hour behind the time he expected.

More recently in 2019 I started a half marathon at around my 5k pace. After 2 miles it became very difficult and the last 11 miles were soul destroying. Why did this happen given that I am a much more experienced runner than I was?

There were a few factors, but the main problem was that I wasn't disciplined enough to hold a pace that was comfortable to me. I tried to sit in with a pack of runners that were going a bit too fast. In reality, if I had run at my own optimum pace, I would probably have picked a few of them off later. Instead I was passed by wave after wave of people later on.

I also neglected to take into consideration that in the 6 weeks since my last half marathon, I had tapered for a marathon, run a marathon PB and then reverse tapered to get to this half marathon. I was not in optimum racing condition and certainly shouldn't have been trying to run faster than 6 weeks previously.

The takeaway here is that ***any pace is going to feel comfortable for the length of time you can hold that pace for. If I start out at my 5k pace, that will feel comfortable for a mile. But it only makes sense to run at that pace if I have 5k to run.*** It sounds obvious but it is far too easy to go too hard on race day and regret it for a long stretch at the end.

Go out at slightly slower than the pace you think you can do for the race and build into the race. Don't worry about what anyone else is doing. Half of them have probably started out too fast themselves!



#3

Not fueling properly (or at all) for a marathon

My long awaited return to the marathon in 2015 was slightly more successful than 2005 but it wasn't without extreme events that could and should have been avoided.

For some reason I was paranoid about getting stomach issues from eating anything during the marathon in 2015, so instead I just didn't take anything at all! Not a sensible idea! I had been running pretty well and was just inside my 2003 time but by mile 20 I was getting light headed and tingly feet.

I must have looked in a bad way because I remember other runners giving me more encouragement than they usually would have. I imagine myself weaving from side to side along those last few miles.

By mile 25 I hadn't been able to feel feet for several miles and then it happened. I went down like a sack of potatoes. I tried to get back to my feet but I couldn't. My legs felt like they were still moving but they weren't. Luckily I'd fallen near St John's ambulance who were able to check me over and give me a gel to perk me back up again.

My biggest fear was that they wouldn't let me finish the race but thankfully they did. Of course my PB was out of the window having been down for twenty minutes.

Please don't do this! It's dangerous and unnecessary and you may not be as lucky as me that someone will be there to help you! If, like me, you are worried about being able to stomach gels, food, sports drinks then make sure you try things out on your long runs. It is never too early to do it.

If you are worried about needing an unscheduled portaloos stop then you can take immodium to try and see you through. Again, test this on a long run. I don't particularly like using it but I usually do it for my biggest races as an insurance policy.

Fuel appropriately for the race you are undertaking. Take into consideration not only the distance involved but the time on your feet. For instance, I've done mountain races that were shorter distance than a marathon but took more than double the time I'd run a marathon in.

My rule of thumb is that you probably need something for anything over 16 miles or 2 hours. In a marathon I now take something small (a gel or a bar) every 30 minutes from the start just to keep topped up but everyone is different so you should work out what is best for you.

Test your fuelling strategy on a long run. Look at where the water stops will be in your race and plan what you are going to take and when. It may be worth taking an extra gel/bar for emergencies too or if you're really stuck then take what is being handed out on the course if you are stuck.



#4

No variety in training

Lack of training variety is a slow death to a running career and it was more by luck than judgement that I escaped this ultimate fate. Between 2009 and 2012 I went on and off running. I'd recently started a 9-5 desk job as a software developer and decided that I needed to do some exercise to stop the pounds from piling on due to inactivity through the day.

Luckily, there were some like minded people in the office and showers to enable us to run at lunchtimes. However, I wasn't really training for anything in particular so we just ran 5 miles a few lunchtimes a week. The same routes, the same pace.

Now, there is nothing wrong with this if all you want to do is run for fitness though I would argue that even then you might well get bored doing the same thing all the time. In 2012 I started targeting 5ks at parkrun on a Saturday too so now I had a focus for my 'training'.

However, I didn't change anything during the week. We kept running 5 miles at the same pace a few times a week. I would 'blast' the parkrun most Saturdays and you can see from my results that at first there was a good but short lived improvement.

After that, I inched my way down painstakingly over about half a year to my then PB. I then gradually started getting slower again. I'd plateaued then peaked as I'd thought, but I was nowhere near my potential.

I was doing no speedwork during the week then expecting to be faster at parkrun on Saturday. ***I was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. That is the first sign of madness.***

This trend was broken when our first child Aaron was born in 2013 and I stopped running. Following my return to running in 2014, I joined a club and learned about different training sessions. I saw the results instantly. Whereas before I was seeing very small increments in improvement or even a slight decline, I was now cutting minutes off my 5k time again.

The point here is that ***any level of training will eventually take you to a plateau at which point you need to change things up again to keep improving.*** The plateau for such a limited variety of training as I was doing in 2012 was quite low though and way below the level to which I got years later.

And not realising this mistake could cost you many years of successful running. Why wait to see what potential you have? The simple answer is that many people do not realise their training is sub optimal. The right training may not need to be harder or even more time consuming but by being varied it can have much more impact.



#5

Being envious of other runners

This is an embarrassing one. I've talked about it before and it is so easily done but at the end of the day ***the only person's performance you can affect is your own***. So why bother worrying about what other people are doing?

It is good and healthy to have a friendly rivalry and finding people around the same ability as you is a good way to push each other on. But be aware that there are so many factors in running that things do not stay the same for very long.

Others may improve faster than you. Their base level of fitness may be higher, they may be able to dedicate more time to training, they may be luckier with injuries. We don't necessarily see the amount and type of work that goes into people's success. By the same token, you may surpass others at the same level.

Also be aware that no matter how much you improve you will never be Eliud Kipchoge or Mo Farah (unless you are actually Kipchoge or Farah and are reading this in which case I am humbled and I wish you very well!).

There will always be someone faster than you. In the same way that there will always be someone slower than you along with the billions of people who don't run at all.

It used to be slightly demoralising when new runners joined the club at a similar level to me and within a few months had surpassed me. But as a coach and alluding to the point about varied training I now know that this is likely to happen as we provide more structured training at the club than what people are likely to do on their own.

Just as I improved quickly when joining a club, so will others.

Focus on what you can control: you. Be happy with striving to push your own level through better more varied training and setting appropriate goals.

Use others around you to help push you on and take inspiration from what they are doing but never worry or be envious of what anyone else is doing. It may lead you to cut corners and eventually set you further back.



#6

Not having a goal or 'I'll do it later'

Having no goal is a sure fire way to stop running altogether. If there is no purpose then why do it at all? I will assume that because you are reading this, you care about your running. You want to improve in some way, maybe through running faster times, getting injured less often or simply enjoying your running more.

The first thing to do is to work out what your primary goal is. Make sure there is a very compelling reason for you to choose this goal. Do not be swayed by others as per the last point! This is your goal and the reason for choosing it is going to spur you on if and when things get tough.

However, even better is to set a roadmap of goals. What do you want to focus on now, in six months or a year? ***If you had one running goal higher than all others, what would it be no matter how unrealistic you think it may be now?*** Ideally, your running goals from now will set you on a path to achieve your biggest goal.

The second thing to do is to start now if you are not currently injured. Why wait?! There may be some mitigating life circumstances that mean now is not a good time to start working towards a big running goal and that is fine, but for most of us there is no better time than now if we are fit and healthy.

I used to think that a sub 3 hour marathon was just a pipe dream. I thought that maybe one day if I put in a tonne of effort and sacrifice everything else that I may get close. But I wasn't willing to do the work. Or I was scared of failing. ***The only failure was not getting started.***

We don't know how tough something will be until we start down the road of achieving it. I thought that there was plenty of time to try and do a sub 3 hour marathon once I had the 'time to train properly'. But none of us are getting any younger.

True that doesn't mean our faster running can't be in our later years and for many people that is the way it works out. But we may have been even faster if we had started earlier. ***We can't change the past but we can change what we do right now.***

My wake up call was getting injured for the first time. I sprained my ankle and was out for 5 weeks. As it turned out my injury wasn't too bad and could certainly have been a lot worse. But it made me realise that you never know what is round the corner and if there is something you want to achieve, you should start today towards doing it.

Strike while the iron is hot. Don't wait for an unexpected setback to hit before making this realisation.



#7

Signing up for unsuitable races and not training on the right terrain

If you sign up to a mountain trail race then don't do all your training on an athletics track. Well this seems obvious doesn't it? But sometimes it is tempting to sign up for something a little different and then work out later that it's going to be difficult to get appropriate training in.

If you find yourself in this situation then I recommend that you take the race easy and see it as an adventure rather than something to belt round and do yourself an injury. You should also ask yourself why you signed up for the race in the first place.

I'm a sucker for the mountains. It takes me back to childhood when we regularly went walking in the mountains. I love the scenery and the sense of achievement when reaching a summit.

As you've probably guessed by now, I also love running. So when I don't think very hard about it, my brain puts the two together and goes - 'bingo! - mountain races are something you should love!' Well thanks brain but actually (for now) I don't enjoy them and there's two main reasons for this.

Firstly, it doesn't fit in with my current primary goals (see point 6). At the moment I am still focusing on road marathons. I'd like to still get faster and I'd like to do all of the world majors.

Therefore, most of my training is on the road. Of course, I will do some running on grass or trail - it is important to mix up terrains to build strength and give yourself a break from running on hard roads all the time - however, a lot of mountain running doesn't fit into my training schedule.

Logistically right now, training in the mountains does not work for me. The main mountains for me to train in are over an hour away and that simply would add too much extra time into an already busy schedule.

It's absolutely fine to identify that something does not fit in with your goals or routine. But don't then sign up for an unsuitable race! There have been a few reasons why I have done so in the past but they are not all good.

The worst reason is to see someone else doing it and think that's what you should be doing (see point 5). Yes by all means, if you want to try something new then do. If you want to do something for fun then do it. But accept it for what it is. Either train properly for it or make sure you get round sensibly in one piece.



#8

Too fast on easy days and too easy on fast days

These two go hand in hand but from my own experience and that of coaching others, it is mainly going too fast on easy days that causes going too easy on fast days.

The big problem here is the word 'easy'. Your marathon pace should feel easy for a short run but physiologically even that is not easy enough. You are still adding stress to your body that will accumulate over time and leave you feeling tired and unable to perform at your best.

For years, I was just going out and running in this middle zone known as 'no-man's land' training. I still believe there is a time and place in training plans for running at this intensity but it just isn't very often.

The vast majority of a runner's miles should be done at a truly easy pace to reduce stress and fatigue leaving them fresh to hit the hard sessions hard. But you will have to consciously think about whether you are running easy enough. Reducing your pace to a minute a mile slower than marathon pace (if you know what this is) will help get to the right speed.

Heart rate monitoring can be a good way to ensure that a run is easy enough. It may require some trial and error to get the right range to run in but for many, 80% of (220 - age) produces a figure that is the top end of where an easy run should be. For runners with a naturally high/low heart rate you may need to make some adjustments to this.

To verify either running by pace or by heart rate you should give the run a perceived exertion rating between 1 and 10. Your easy run should be no more than a 4 out of 10. You should be able to hold a full conversation whilst running.

There are many other factors than effort that will affect how easy a run is too. Hills will require more effort. You may choose to keep the whole run easy by dropping back the pace or even walking hills. You may decide that a small amount of extra effort to get you up a hill is a fair trade off for maintaining your pace. Just don't overdo it.

Weather can be a factor. Running into a strong wind requires much more effort than running with a strong tailwind. Heat will raise your heart rate too making running more difficult. You may even be getting ill or recovering from a previous workout. Your heart rate may be more elevated and you may feel more sluggish. Listen to your body and rest up if you find you are coming down with an illness.

At the same time, you should not be afraid to push hard on the hard days. Do not go at full throttle every session but you certainly need some sessions where you get out of your comfort zone. For too long I was running towards the edge but never over it. ***Sometimes you need to take a look over the edge to see what is there.***



#9

Not enjoying training

I used to say I would run a marathon every month if I didn't have to do all the training for it. I was completely missing the point. Sure marathons can be a great experience but they should just be a culmination of a great training experience.

Of course there will be days when training seems harder or we don't enjoy it as much but most of the time we should look forward to and embrace training. Instead of focusing on the negatives 'it's cold/wet/windy outside' or 'I'm too busy to spare an hour for training today', think of all the positives that come with running.

The thing I now say most to people who don't understand me running is **'You never regret going out for a run'** which I would say is true 99% of the time. I think this reframe in my mind came from my short break with injury.

During this time I was so frustrated about not being able to get out for a run. Previously, I always had a choice. Being injured though meant that choice was taken away from me. I also found my mood and general energy drop during this time.

I previously saw running as a cheap* way to exercise, a chore to get done. But I now appreciate it far more than I ever did. I definitely 'caught the running bug' and it is much greater than simply the highs of racing.

I've known since I got back into running in 2014 that running lifts my mood. It gives me time and space to think. It allows me to clear my head and think about problems in a different way or come up with new ideas to put into action.

Everyday I get out running I am thankful that I am fit and healthy and able to run. I also know keeping up consistency in my training pays off in my racing results.

Sometimes it is easy to think about very specific problems you have right now, a little niggle, a lack of motivation, but often **comparing yourself to when you first began can give a real sense of satisfaction of how far you have come on the journey so far.**

So next time you are lacing up your shoes and the rain is lashing outside and you've a lack of motivation just think about your life before you were a runner and how much it has changed who you are today. Go out, embrace it and enjoy it!

**Of course running is no longer as cheap as it used to be for me. Eating up miles in expensive shoes and running marathons around the world takes its toll on the bank balance!*



#10 Letting failure derail my running

Please learn from the mistakes above. If I can help even one other person from falling into one of the traps above then it makes the experience even more worthwhile.

Of course you will make your own mistakes. We all do. However, ***how we react to a mistake or failure is what determines whether we are weaker and stronger for it.*** You can learn some things from what works but it is almost easier to learn from things that didn't work.

The worst thing is to let a bad experience put you off something for good (or at least a long time). This is what happened to me after my DNF in 2005. It took me 10 years to get to the start line of another marathon. 10 years! That is how deep the impact of not facing failure was.

If the mistake was doing something you didn't really want to do then learn from it and make a better decision next time. But in my case it wasn't that I didn't want to do a marathon, it was that I did not train properly, did not have a plan for the race and did not have the mental willpower to stick at it.

Just like the saying 'get back on the horse' (presumably one that has just thrown you off) you should confront a failure, work out why it happened and learn from it by putting it right next time. Shying away from doing it again will only leave you with negative thoughts around that scenario.

For me, I irrationally told myself that maybe the marathon wasn't for me even though I knew from my first attempt that I could do it and pretty well. I told myself that one marathon was enough and I probably couldn't do any better than that anyway.

The truth is that the first time you do anything it is almost slightly easier. You have the added incentive of achieving something for the first time. You don't know how difficult it will be yet so whilst you may be anxious, you don't know exactly what you are anxious about.

The second time you know how hard it will be. I probably hoped it would be easier. It was never going to be easier without training. You know that you've done it before so it might not feel as big an achievement.

But we should celebrate every single thing we do. We never know when will be the last time we do anything unless we make a conscious decision not to do something again. Even then we can change our minds. So embrace every time you go out and give it your all.

Turn mistakes or failure into the learning processes they should be. We can never execute perfectly on every single thing, there are always too many factors. There is always somewhere we can improve. And ***if lots of things go wrong, then it is much easier to improve the next time.***



How this can help you

Here, laid bare, are 10 mistakes that I don't want any other runner to go through. Start by taking one and implementing it into your training or next race. In the meantime, look out in your inbox for more ideas and thoughts that have helped me progress my running and can do the same for me.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and please get in touch to let me know which point you found most useful or anything else running related at alan@therunningrules.com.

Don't let your running end in a 10 year black hole!

