

THE MAKING OF A CHAMPION

A while ago Athletics New Zealand brought 1984 Olympic 800m champion Joaquim Cruz to New Zealand for a series of clinics. The following is a subjective and personal account of the Christchurch clinic. The clinic was in three general parts – background and motivation of Cruz, training/coaching methods including athletics and coaching philosophies and finally a practical demonstration of drills and exercises (what Cruz called “running gymnastics.”)

Cruz’s story and motivation is relevant to all athletes and coaches and his ideas on periodisation and training should be of interest to all coaches.

Cruz the man.

Have your dreams. This was the underlying and oft-repeated message. Cruz was one of 5 children in a very poor family living in a slum in the poorest region of Brazil. The idea of a university education, travelling the world, having money, winning an Olympic gold medal was pure fantasy. Realistically, it wasn’t even fantasy. But Joaquim dreamed. He dreamed of travelling, of representing Brazil, first in soccer, then in basketball. Representing his country in athletics was almost by accident. His running was noticed during basketball training. He was persuaded to enter a local race. He thought that was it. Running hurt, he didn’t want to do it again, now he could get back to basketball. But the race qualified him for another, a state championship, which meant a trip. So agreed to run one more race. And that qualified him for another championship. So he did that, thinking it would be his last. It wasn’t, he kept qualifying for one more race, ultimately an international event. Suddenly, he loved athletics. The pain was worth it if you got to travel and wear the Brazilian singlet.

He put it to the coaches and athletes he was addressing that he must have had incredible talent to come out of nowhere, a complete unknown who did no track training but ran fast times and won races. How could anyone run like this on no training? The audience agreed he was an incredible talent. He then emphatically denied it. He told us that yes, he did have talent. But doing it on talent alone with no training? No way. He pointed out that he played soccer every day, sometimes all day, played and practised basketball most evenings. He ran in games, he ran in practises developing aerobic capacity and speed. His team sports developed strength, speed endurance, stamina, power and co-ordination. Every time he tried to dunk a basketball or touch the rim he boosted strength, speed and power. He was effectively doing plyometrics every day. He may not have been on the track training, but he WAS training.

The message came through very clearly – sport is a journey. And that the journey (he called it the process) is what’s important, not the outcome. Focus on the process and the outcome will happen. But you must dare to dream. And you need to have the courage to make it happen.

Dream it and it might happen. Don’t dream and it wont happen. And if you do dream and it still doesn’t happen, make it happen. He dreamt of playing for Brazil. It didn’t happen in soccer or basketball, but he made it happen on the track.

And that is only possible if you have a passion, if you believe in yourself, if you are prepared to face pain, challenges and obstacles, or as he put it, to “challenge the dragons”. To do this you must be a 24-hour athlete. Every moment of every day you are an athlete. When you are not running or training you must still think as an athlete. Being a 24-hour athlete impacts on your diet, on what you do through the day, when you go to bed, what you think about (e.g. taking time to practise visualisation of races.) One of his pre-race mental strategies was to imagine himself reading the newspaper report of the race. He was mentally preparing himself for the event, he could familiarise himself on the opposition and tactics used by reading about it, and most importantly, he prepared himself for success. Naturally his imaginary newspaper reports had him winning.

He also emphasised every situation should be a learning opportunity. He was beaten in an important race just before the Olympics. Asked whether he made a mistake in that race he said yes, and it was a good mistake to make. Having made it there was no chance of the same mistake being made in the Olympics. Learn from every opportunity.

2. Coaching.

Cruz advocated coaching an athlete should be a four-year cycle. It takes four years for effective strategies to be put into practise and to take effect, to develop the coach/athlete relationship fully, to achieve effective goal setting and to maximise athlete and coach potential. It reinforced his emphasis of having a dream – you won't realise your dreams immediately but if you have long-term goals those dreams can be made to happen.

First year – develop a rapport, learn about the athlete, emphasise overall conditioning, introduce athlete to different ways of training and workouts, play other sports in off-season.

Second year – finalise short-term objectives, develop training programme, have athlete getting used to training in order to train (train to get fit enough to train harder), finish the year competing.

Third year – explore short AND long-term objectives, train for specific event, train to compete (note second year was training to train, now it's training to compete), finish year competing.

Fourth year – explore other events related to main event (1500m for 800m runners etc) learning has been done now its maintenance of programme and training for competition and again, finish the year competing.

Periodisation

Cruz had a definitive periodisation plan based on what worked for him as an athlete (as originated by his coach Luis Alberto Oliveira).

1. Adaptation and Conditioning (2 – 4 weeks).

Get to know the athlete – health check – set objectives (short and long term) – nutritional evaluation – informal training concentrating on short distance, drills, running gymnastics, strides, games.

2. Basic Preparation (12 - 18 weeks)

Usually done in racing flats and often on natural surfaces.

Phase 1 (6 – 9 weeks) – aerobic condition (long run) – motor skills aerobic and anaerobic conditioning (running gymnastics) – strength and stability (weights, modified yoga) – strength (sand hills and soft sand) – recovery) massage, swimming, rest).

Phase 2 – aerobic capacity) fartlek, long runs, long hills) – anaerobic conditioning (tempo intervals*, endurance circuits, time trials) – recovery.

*e.g. Tempo intervals: 3 x 3 x 200, 20" between reps, 3' between sets; 3 x 4 or 5 x 300 with 100m jog between reps, 3' jog between sets; 3 x 4 x 500m with 1 to 2 min rests between reps, 3 min between sets.

3. Transition (1 – 2 weeks)

Aerobic conditioning - change of scene (train somewhere else) play games (soccer, frisbee) – aerobic/anaerobic capacity (speed circuits, holding breath sprints *) – recovery.

** holding breath sprints have no known physiological benefits apart from developing an ability to run fast without taking in more air (theoretically should develop anaerobic tolerance), but has psychological gains, particularly in learning to cope with high lactate state. Would do 200m with alternate 50m breathing, 50m holding breath.)*

4. Pre Competition (8 – 12 weeks)

On track, in spikes or racing flats

Aerobic/anaerobic capacity (similar rep distances to phase 2 of Basic Preparation but faster times and longer recoveries between reps but similar recoveries between sets, e.g. 3 x 4 x 300m with 3 min rest between reps and 5 min between sets – anaerobic conditioning (threshold running, fartlek) – aerobic capacity (long intervals and long hills) – anaerobic capacity (short sprints, downhill running, circuit training) – power (circuits on soft sand, short hills) – race practise - strength and stability work (twice week).

5. Competition (8 – 10 weeks)

Anaerobic capacity (speed development, speed endurance, lactate tolerance) – race specific training (2 x 1 x 600 then 300 then 300 with 400m jog between reps, 6 min between sets or 3 x 500m at faster than race pace with 10 min rests) – race strategies – recovery.

6. Transition or recovery (8 – 10 weeks)

Active games – health evaluation.

Note, this gives a macrocycle over a year – are our athletes planning that far ahead?

In all training Cruz's emphasis is on speed. He loves running fast, he loves to feel the wind on his face, he tried to make each session faster than the last. If he did a 10 mile run today or a hill rep tomorrow he would want it to be faster next time. And faster again the session after that. He felt if he wasn't progressing he was going backwards. Obviously this is a good attitude in the right athlete, and part of Cruz's greatness comes from his incredible desire to succeed and competitiveness including the need to compete against himself. The sessions his coach gave him were incredibly tough. Cruz said often, his coach was crazy, a crazy man to give me this, but I was crazy too and I did it all.

But as coaches we must be careful with young athletes displaying the same characteristics. Cruz survived. Not everyone would. Not everyone is that crazy. Or that talented. Or that driven. The ones that are become Olympic champions.