



## *The Winning Mindset*

### **Christian Cushing-Murray**

### *The Secret to Running Faster*

**Purpose:** The purpose of CTCs *The Winning Mindset* is to collect and present articles by accomplished athletes, coaches, and business leaders in an effort to provide our readers with valuable insight into successful training, racing, business, and the characteristics of a high-performance mindset.

Christian Cushing-Murray is a RUNNER, period! His unique journey throughout his time with the sport serves as a genuine inspiration to others. Also, in light of his article below, the reader can sense that hard work has earned Christian every ounce of improvement from an early age. He graduated high school at 16, running a 4:15 for the 1600m. At UCLA he gradually worked his way to a 3:42.8 for the 1500m as a 5<sup>th</sup> year senior, **NEVER** qualifying for NCAAs.

Did I mention Christian is a RUNNER? Not convinced it was time to pack it in after his college days were over, he kept at his craft and gained a position on the prestigious Santa Monica Track Club – home of multiple Gold Medalists and World Records. Christian chopped his mile best down to 3:55, eventually placing 6<sup>th</sup> at the US Olympic Trials 1500m run. He ranked in the US top 10 for that event from 1991-1996.

Not surprising, he never stopped running and eventually set the American Record for the 45-49 age group, clocking a 3:55 for the 1500m.

- [Please stop and unpack the depth of that accomplishment in any way that possibly makes sense to you: At 45, I was attending my daughter's college graduation. Imagine **your dad** running a **4:14 mile equivalent** when you are 23 years-old!]

He is in his 39<sup>th</sup> consecutive year as a sub 5:00 miler. Christian teaches English at Century High School in Santa Ana, CA and has coached track and cross country.

## CTCs Request

I met Christian while I was coaching within the Southern California USATF region. He was a course guide at our local youth cross country races and was a parent of a child on the Equalizers' Track Club. He was greatly appreciated as a class-act and friendly fan of the sport, who encouraged the kids and parents through both words and example.

Track kids often excel in practical math skills (there are 1,312 feet in 400 meters, for example) and kids in our region knew how to run fast. Each year, the calculating kids would pull the coaches or parents aside and marvel that one of "the dads" was faster than everyone on our National Championship squads.

When I started the CTC Run Faster Library, Christian's story was a perfect example that I wanted to highlight for our readers. I asked Christian to share his valuable insight from competing for nearly 40 years in the sport. The article he prepared is straightforward and I hope our readers and athletes can take the message to heart - PUT IN THE WORK!

Christian never qualified for NAAs, but figured out how to propel himself to becoming one of the top lifelong competitors in our sport's history - Enjoy!

## Christian's Response

### The Secret to Running Faster - Running

Or, a Lengthy Blog in Which I Mix Metaphors, Arbitrarily Assign Percentages, Make Completely Unscientific Observations, and Arrogantly Attempt to Read Minds...



Christian Cushing-Murray (#545), representing the Santa Monica Track Club in the 1996 U.S. Olympic Trials.

I am an unabashed Tour de France fan--perhaps paradoxically, for while my enthusiasm for my own sport of track has diminished because of the spectre of drugs, I have no problem spending over 80 hours every July watching "Le Tour." So, it was with some amusement the other day going up a modest 2-3 % grade that I ran past a cyclist decked out in full regalia on a multi-thousand dollar bike in full aerodynamic pose with his full forward time-trial handlebars.

Here is where I try to reconcile my full arrogance (dude, just what are you thinking as I run past you in my \$60 shoes?) with SOME measure of humanity (good on ya, way to get out and at it), but I'm generally unsuccessful in this endeavor. As a high school teacher, I get annoyed by the student who doesn't do their homework or study for tests, but then has the temerity to ask for extra-credit to raise their grade. I'll admit to unfairly projecting this annoyance on this poor, unsuspecting cyclist, but there is this sense that many people want success without the work. And, in the absence of work, there is this hope that they can buy success with gimmicks.

Fortunately, most of the time this just doesn't work.

If I'm a runner (as it happens, I am) or a cyclist (just a fan) or a guitarist (I've happily achieved a high level of mediocrity), I'm going to keep my focus on the 90% that will make me better before I focus on the small percentage of things that'll help me improve. So, with my guitar, I feel my mediocrity has yet to justify me getting a better guitar than my \$150 Gibson Epiphone. You could argue that getting a nicer guitar may inspire me to practice more, but I still call that putting the cart before the horse. Same with a bike; if I want to get better, I'm going to practice more with a modest bike and equipment and achieve some modest level of proficiency before I move up to top of the line materials. Or as a student, I'm going to do the regular work before I ask for extra work.

So, just what is this 90% that runners should focus on then? According to my completely unscientific observations it's this: running. Yes, I can imagine this is not a revelation to most, but I think it still bears repeating. As a coach and competitor, I get asked all the time about how to improve speed, form, stride length, oscillation, ground contact, cadence, etc.--all worthwhile questions--but oftentimes these questions are asked by those who forget the main ingredient: running. The other stuff is "extra-credit," and emphasizing it will never make up for lack of attention to the real work.

What follows is my arbitrary measure of the remaining 10%:

4%: Good coaching/smart training. If running were bread, this may be the yeast: a small ingredient, but without it, the bread will not rise. Sure, this could be a bigger percentage of the pie, but experience tells me--given athletes of equal physical gifts--that ninety-four out of a hundred times, the athlete that runs a lot and trains hard but has poor coaching will beat the athlete who doesn't run but has a great coach.

2%: Diet. This is not to underestimate its importance (I actually take this very seriously

in my training), but think about this: with all the recent “discoveries” made about carb-loading, recovery drinks, gluten, electrolytes, carb-protein ratios, the last (and only) high school junior to break 4 minutes in the mile was...1964. Given that he was a farmboy from Kansas, I’m guessing steak and gluten were staples in his diet. So how did he do it? He ran 100+ miles per week on a regular basis. I used to travel with a teammate straight outta Pearl, Mississippi who ran 1:46.58 in high school, and out on the professional European track circuit he seemed to know where every McDonalds was in every country, yet he still managed to run 1:44.00 in the 800. Now, you could easily argue that maybe a better diet could have gotten him under 1:44 where another 4/100s of a second would have put him on an Olympic team in 1992, but it’s infinitely more instructive to learn what got him to that 1:44.00. Having trained with him, I can tell you: it was good old-fashioned running--a fair amount, and wicked fast, with a regular dose of suffering pretty much every other day.

1%: Science/Technology. For all the new info and advances we have with all-weather surfaces, training and racing shoes, oversized platforms to minimalist soles, lactate thresholds, mitochondria, garmins that measure everything from oscillation to ovulation, altitude tents, alter-g treadmills, hyperbaric chambers (yes, I lumped all of that into just 1%), in my opinion, the only truly compelling advances made with distance running have been blood doping and Erythropoietin (EPO). But here’s the funny thing: even with the 1990s introduction of EPO and the subsequent and significant assaults on almost every distance world record, all EPO allows you to do is TRAIN HARDER! So, if you want a world record you have two choices: train hard, or dope and train hard. Either way, you still have to...wait for it...TRAIN HARD! For the record, I am not advocating drug-use in any way; however, I will say that in the absence of drug-use, I doubt science has helped us more than Arthur Lydiard saying we’ve got to run more or Mihaly Igloi saying we’ve got to run fast or Jack Daniels saying we’ve got to run with a plan.

1%: Biomechanics. I love hearing experts talk about longer levers, hips forward, up-tall, arm placement, etc. as if they’re God and Einstein put together and they know exactly how to build the ideal runner who will both run fast and resolve the unified field theory in physics. All I know is I’ve been told I have pretty ideal form, but Jeff Atkinson and Mark Everett, two of the worst forms I’ve seen out there, made Olympic teams and finals while my perfect form sat its perfection on the couch during the games. I also have better form than hall of fame masters runner Pete Magill, but that hasn’t stopped him from generally whupping my ass more than I’ve whupped his.

0.01%: Superstition and/or Religion. I’ll avoid snarkily implying that this may be redundant (okay, maybe I didn’t avoid it...); I will say that I don’t know any athletes that don’t feel it’s a factor, either consciously or subconsciously. We have routines (I do sudokus before races), favorite socks or underwear (Michael Jordan famously wore his North Carolina shorts under his Chicago Bulls shorts), religious rituals, etc., and, despite my thought that God could care less about the outcome of any sporting event, and my suspicion that any public acts of gratitude to Him are exactly that--an act--I do believe whatever helps you relax, and whatever helps you have faith in yourself, matters.

The other 1.99%: Intangibles. I don't know what they are. Neither do you.

Given these wholly oversimplified generalizations that are nonetheless true because I say so, what should garner the lion's share of your attention? Running. What is easiest to understand and control? Running. Once you've embraced that to its fullest, then, and ONLY THEN, give your time (and money) to the other aspects of training, and never make the mistake of assuming the other aspects can counter your deficiencies in attending to the 90%. So, fully decked out cyclist dude who's unwittingly drawn my ire: trade it in for a Schwinn--you'd probably get a better workout, and you'd look less ridiculous. That's my story and I'm sticking to it...



Christian winning the Masters' 5K at the 2016 Carlsbad 5K, nearly one year to the day that his oldest brother died in a kayaking accident in Washington. The two had shared fond memories at that race venue in previous years. This would be Christian's last Masters' victory at Carlsbad.

### The following are specific examples of how Christian trained during his peak years:

#### THE 90%: RUNNING!

Now for the specifics: I don't want to dwell too long on the 90% aspect of running fast (i.e. "running"), because there are so many different successful philosophies of training, it'd be impossible to come up with a one-size-fits-all plan. But if you're curious about what a 3:55 miler did with the Santa Monica Track Club in the 90s, I'll share some nuts and bolts of our workouts.

A bread and butter workout for so many milers, of course, would be 400s. We usually did 10-12 x 400, in sets of 4, with 200m active jog recovery between reps, and 400 jog between sets. The best I managed was 12, averaging all of them in 56 seconds.

A grinder workout that we'd do in the winter months was 3x(6x200m+6x250m). To read



that correctly, yes, we were doing 36 reps; we'd get a 100m jog between 200s, 150m jog between 250s, 400m jog between sets, and you just kept moving around the track, never stopping, and if teammates fell off, so be it--we would maybe regroup each set. My coach would not let us wear our watches in this workout, but if I had to guess, at my best I was averaging 29 second 200m pace all around. Between warm-up, workout and cool-down we'd put in around 10 miles on the track, basically a structured fartlek.

Saturday long runs were mostly on a grass median in Santa Monica, ranging from 8 miles to 16 miles. Our long runs were NEVER slow--in fact, any time we ran over 7 miles, we were moving. Typically I'd run these around 5:20 mile pace or faster.

We'd do frequent time trials in the winter/early spring, usually 1200m--I struggled with these, and the best I can remember running was 2:53-ish. However, there may be one workout that I did that may have been more impressive even than my PR races: 1000m/800m/400m, full recovery (around 10 minutes) between each. I did the 1000m and 800m behind a 1:44 800 runner, managing 2:20 and 1:52, perfect 28 pace through every 200m. I actually can't remember what I did the 400m in, but it was fast--sub 55 at least--but I was left in the dust by my training partner. In a similar vein, I ran 3x800m with full recovery and went 1:51, 1:51, 1:50. Unfortunately, the 800m race that followed several days later also produced a 1:50...

#### THE 4%: COACHING

I would be happy to concede that my argument/example about coaching only being 4% is a bit specious, so let me clarify with a more realistic scenario/hypothesis: Meb Keflezighi probably would have been great with virtually any coach, and perhaps would have won his olympic medal with any elite coach (take your pick among any of the current professional training groups). But in this case, I'm going to give Bob Larsen credit for that 4% advantage in terms of Meb's body of work and the breadth of his career. And this is the crux of my remaining 10% argument: when you're talking about the long, hard fight for seconds, and sometimes fractions of seconds, that separate good from great, or great from the greatest, then and only then should a huge part of your focus be on the minutiae, because then and only then does it matter.

On a more personal level, I ran the equivalent of a 4-flat mile for Bob Larsen while at U.C.L.A., and I credit Bob for giving me ownership of my own running and training; I flourished under Bob, and had more fun than any collegiate student-athlete should be allowed to have. But under Joe Douglas, I learned what a professional commitment to the sport meant, and through both of these coaches I began to understand the full nature of the risks involved with setting high goals. We met 7 days a week, 11 months out of the year, taking New Years and Christmas off. He was visibly disturbed when I asked for a week off for my wedding and honeymoon in May during the middle of the season. He really did expect 100% commitment to the cause; to that point, when I used to get asked how hard was it to train for a 3:55 mile, my usual response was "I don't know—I always felt I trained like a 3:51-3:52 miler." Joe wanted me to set my sights on making an Olympic team—working as hard as I was for anything less at that stage of my life would have been pointless. The fact that I "only" ran 3:55 is my own cross to

bear, but I'm proud, and content, that I had that rare opportunity to truly, and realistically, dream big regardless of the outcome. Everyday of my life since then only confirms the privileges and blessings I experienced with my 7 years of running with the Santa Monica Track Club, not in a "those were the best days of my life" way, but in the way that's it's influenced every other pursuit since, such as coaching, parenting, and teaching.

Furthermore on coaching: you do have two simple choices, at least once you've made your decision on who's going to be your coach. One, don't have complete faith in your coach, and you're destined to fail; or two, have faith in your coach, and you at least give yourself a chance for success and growth. But be aware there are no guarantees...

#### THE 2%: DIET

To illustrate how seriously I took diet during my professional days, I ate the same bowl of cereal (my own secret recipe of whole oats, grape nuts, walnuts, almonds, raisins, a whole banana, half an apple, and wheat germ) for breakfast, and the same tuna fish sandwich and carrots for lunch around 300 days out of the year. Dinner was healthy in general, but whatever I wanted. I've maintained much of this routine during the most competitive months of my masters years. The main reason is I wanted my body to feel predictably good on a daily basis--my coach, Joe Douglas, would never accept the excuse of "I'm having a bad day" or "my stomach hurts" or even "I've got to rush off to the bathroom" during an interval workout, and for my part, I didn't want ever want to have excuses. So my body's routine was important, down to bowel movements (yeah, too much information).

To put it another way: when I was at U.C.L.A., I remember occasionally eating dinner in the dorms with one of the best throwers in the country, Dave Wilson. I'd watch him pile up three plates, each piled with hefty servings of rice, corn, and whatever the main course was, and then put them down deliberately and with little pleasure--it was time-consuming and I'm sure he was eating well beyond satiation. When asked why he did it when it clearly wasn't enjoyable, he simply said "it's part of the workout." Seeing the most talented (if you can quantify that) guy in the room approach eating like that was eye-opening for me, and it's become a sort of mantra for me when I try a new idea diet-wise in the name of running. When I first experimented with drinking beet juice, which tastes something like drinking dirt, I simply reminded myself that it's part of the workout.

#### THE 1%: SCIENCE/TECHNOLOGY

Having quantified science and technology as 1% before the carbon plate rage, I suppose I could recalculate my percentages and give this one 4%, but I won't. Instead, if you're taking two athletes equally equipped, or the same athlete equally equipped but from race to race, science and tech is NOT going to be a large part of what separates them.

To use one of the dudes I compete against as an example, multiple age-group record holder Sean Wade regularly uses an altitude tent. While it would be easy to claim the secret to running 14:52 for 5k as a 50 year old is one of these tents, I'd say the more

obvious “secret” is starting off with open PRs of 13:40 in the 5k or 2:10 in the marathon, mix in some really hard training and a little luck, and I’d bet he would’ve broken records without the tent. That said, the tent was a resource that, one, he could afford, and two, probably announced daily his commitment to chasing these records.

In my best days as an open runner, I kept it simple (though not painless): I iced daily (below the knees) and took ice baths 3 times per week after all hard workouts. I also used a tasteless carbohydrate powder with water after hard workouts (back then the studies only emphasized carb replacement and not protein). None of it was enjoyable, but to repeat my earlier mantra, I felt these things were part of the workout.

#### THE 1%: BIOMECHANICS

I’ll keep the 1% on biomechanics short: I left this to my coach. I would try to implement some of his recommendations on form, especially during workouts, but more often than not at the end of some of these workouts the name of the game was survival, not “drive your knees” or “stay tall,” etc. My wholly unscientific take is that running frequency takes care of most of the worst form offenses, and fatigue will make the worst of even the best forms, but staying relaxed will mitigate the most negative consequences of either.

#### THE 0.01%: SUPERSTITION AND/OR RELIGION

It would be easy for many to argue that their supreme being influences everything they do, and that their level of gratitude should reflect that, and I have absolutely no counter to that. But to explain the miniscule percentage assigned, I would offer this: even the most sincerely and devoutly religious person would admit that the work comes first before he has a chance to beat an equally trained and equally talented competitor, and faith may give him or her the edge, which by definition describes narrow and secondary qualities.

For my part, in my open days when you’re traveling a lot on the indoor and summer racing circuit, you had so little control over your routine, you better not harbor too many food or sleep superstitions. I kept it simple: I’d generally enjoy one beer the night before any race. I generally stayed away from alcohol most of the year when training/racing, but that one beer the night before a race seemed to help me decompress, and probably helped me sleep when sleep patterns were often awry in different time zones.

#### THE 1.99%: INTANGIBLES

Life is unpredictable. My PR for 1500m is 3:37.94, which I did twice to the hundredth of a second, two different years (1992 and 1993); both of these races were in my first race off the plane over in Europe (London ‘92, Lille ‘93), so you could argue that I adjust well immediately or jet lag has a delayed effect on me. However, my second best performance is a 3:38.03 from Belgium, 1994; this was my last race in a series of 5 races in 5 different European countries in 13 days. You’d think I would have been fatigued at the end of this series, yet I inexplicably managed to get within less than a tenth of a second of my PR. The body is a funny thing, and I take some comfort in its ability to surprise us all, even if this means I have to take the good with the bad. In fact, it is these risks, in all of their anxiety-producing glory, that keep me running.