



The Winning Mindset

Alan Culpepper

Top 5 Essentials for Every Professional Runner

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.

We strive to show the reader that many of the base principles of successful athletes and leaders apply outside of the sporting world as well. We value honest author perspectives and purposefully avoid asking too many questions that may steer the conversation into a predictable / expected outcome. Readers are encouraged to scrutinize our articles, identify patterns, and to appreciate differences.

From 1991 – 2008 Alan Culpepper represented USA distance running. As a 5-time Texas State High School Champion Alan progressed to NCAA 5K Champion, 7-time USA Cross Country / Track & Field Champion, 4-time World Championships competitor and 2-time Olympian (10000m and Marathon). He has the unique distinction, that only 25 athletes have accomplished, in that he broke 4:00 minutes for the mile (3:55) and ran under 2:10 for the marathon (2:09:41). Alan worked diligently to capitalize on the opportunity to compete on the biggest competitive stage in the sport. The longevity of his professional career and his approach to training and competition serves as a model for all athletes and coaches to consider.

Alan's book, *Run Like a Champion*, is a unique book that every aspiring professional should have on their shelf. In the book, the reader captures glimpses of true professionalism at work and the characteristics of a winning mindset that applies to sports as well as business.

Culpeppercoaching.com is Alan's coaching website that people can use to request coaching and consultation services from Alan.

CTCs Request: Alan was asked to write an article aimed at accomplished collegiate or high school runners who are considering the daunting decision to pursue Olympic and World Championship goals.

Our readers would benefit from purchasing his book, reading this article, and taking a serious personal inventory of what one *says* their goals are and compare it to the *daily* choices one makes to relentlessly pursue those lofty goals. Enjoy!

Alan's Response (March 2019):

If you were to look intently at the characteristic of professional athletes and in particular, those that elevate to the highest level and/or have long productive careers, you will quickly recognize certain essential virtues they all share. Whether NFL Football, Major League Baseball, Pro-Beach Volleyball, Tennis, Swimming, Speed Skating or any other traditional Olympic sport, you will find a commonality of shared standards. Running at the professional level is no different. There is a common misconception that those that elevate to the highest-level, make Olympic Teams, achieve National or World Records are merely the most gifted physically. Their ability to train harder, absorb training more effectively, have a more efficient gait or muscle makeup is thought to be the primary differentiator from other athletes. While this is partially true, this position fails to take into account the underlying framework that also lends to these athletes being able to fully exploit their physical talent.



After winning the US Olympic Trials Marathon, Alan ran to a 12th place finish at the 2004 Olympic Games. Culpepper averaged 5:09 per mile in the balmy 90+ degree temperatures in Athens.

I was fortunate to compete professionally for 10 years. I say fortunate, because it was a wonderful lifestyle that blended my unrelenting desire to get the most out of myself and laser focus on my goals with my occupation. This coupled with a natural physical aptitude for distance running and inherent high level of self-discipline made for a nice combination. It is rare to blend your goals with your work in such a way that your livelihood and aspirations align. This is not to say that it was all fun and games and there were not significant periods or moments of disappointment that often offset the flashes of elation.

When your highs are very high and your lows are very low, it makes for an exhilarating combination. Without question you feel fully alive and that is a life well lived from my perspective. I should be reluctant to use the word “fortunate” because much of what I am going to share are learned skills and aspects that I worked hard to refine, so, much of the success I was able to experience was self-perpetuated. I did not dictate my ability level, VO2 Max, muscle compound, upbringing, coaches I ran under and learned from, but I did refine many areas that went beyond just physical attributes or preparedness.

I cannot tell you how many times I have heard the story told by someone that knew a person in High School that was super talented and “if they only would have applied themselves they would have made it to the Olympics”. I somewhat take offense to these sentiments because it diminishes the efforts put forth by those that did apply themselves and minimizes the fact that achieving greatness is very hard on a whole myriad of levels. Every high school has some individual who is gifted physically, that is great and makes for a nice anecdote but without the whole package then the story falls short. This is not to say that we do not get help along the way or that we cannot work on those areas where we need refinement. I do not mean to brush off those that did not fulfill their potential but let us not minimize what it really takes either.

Below are what I feel are the top 5 elements that are necessary to achieve your full potential as a professional runner. All of these aspects overlap and complement each other; this is why I would argue they are the most vital. These are not attributes but rather trainable characteristics or at a minimum are areas that once recognized must be focused on. This list is not exhaustive by any means and there are certainly athletes that have achieved amazing results without all of these attributes. It is important to recognize that not all athletes have these qualities and critical to understand that they are the exception, not the rule. The vast majority of all high achievers in athletics share these commonalities, the odd super talent that can get away with a less focused, whimsical approach is not who we should be emulating. Look at the athletes that rise to the highest level, win medals, set world records, and then narrow it down to those that were able to duplicate those amazing achievements. Look to those runners that were able to achieve greatness over multiple years, in multiple distances and in varying types of races. I employed this process when I first graduated college. I looked around me in Boulder, Colorado and quickly discovered examples of this right in front of me, runners like former World Record holders Arturo Barrios and Steve Jones to name a few. I also revisited my time as a high school runner growing up in El Paso, Texas and used the example of runners like Suleiman Nyambui and Michael Musyoki who had attended UTEP in its height of dominance. Again, the list to follow is not exhaustive but will provide a good framework for understanding that the life of a professional runner goes beyond intervals, long runs and easy days. It must be an all-encompassing endeavor.

Take Accountability of your Running:

The first and most important aspect to conceptualize, understand and act upon is taking accountability for your running. This sport demands all of yourself and it cannot be left in the hands of your coach, your team, training partners, sponsor, agent or family member. Gone are the days of leaning on your team or college coach to ensure that your running is the highest priority. The college system lends nicely to the team dynamic, the group collectively elevating the training level, and a shared common goal with individual objectives within that framework. I have seen many athletes struggle with the transition from college to professional running simply because they are not ready or willing to burden the responsibility of their running. This does not mean you have to become your own coach or agent but rather take on the full level of accountability for achieving your goals.

Your coach should not be there to hold your hand or coddle you along the way, their role is to provide the necessary training and confidence that you are fully prepared. If they cannot provide the appropriate level of confidence in your preparation to meet your goals, then seeking out a coach who will is part of your taking accountability. Every aspect we will discuss next falls under this premise. These are your goals and ultimately when you are finished you are the one who has to live with the outcome. No matter how great your club is or fantastic your coach or supportive your family and friends, you are the one that will lay your head down at night and must live with the results. A coach might be disappointed or frustrated and your team or sponsor might have periods of similar feelings but only you will feel the full burden and/or gratification that accompanies this endeavor. I have moments that I look back on very fondly, I also have regrets - but in the end, I can live with those because ultimately my running was mine. Take stock, be honest - are you really owning it, accountable to it, willing to sacrifice more than you imagined for it? This is the starting point.

Understanding your training is your responsibility:

An extension of taking accountability for your running is having a clear understanding of your training. This is the next aspect that falls under your areas of responsibility. Again, this is not to say that you should be your own coach, or that you should not allow your coach to bear the burden of your training. Most of the greatest runners found success by relaying their training to their coach. However, you still need to understand the fundamentals, the framework, and the source of the training elements. Comprehension leads to confidence. There is a difference between comprehending your training and

dictating your training. Without comprehension, you will miss a very important aspect of training success; internal perception. Feeling the training, sensing how your body is responding, understanding the various systems that are being worked, and appreciating the mixture of sessions and how they all blend together in the process is what I mean by comprehension and internal perception.

As you gain more insight into the “What” and “Why” of your training, you will work towards the “Belief” and “Trust” that are critical. Athletes that do not work towards a functioning level of understanding often end up missing the nuances in training. They are not able to make the small adjustments along the way that are associated with staying healthy, peaking at the right time or rising up to a new level when the opportunity presents itself. Comprehending your training is an extension of taking accountability for it - and as is the case with my first point - nobody should be thinking about this or caring about it more than you care. If training is one of the greatest areas of emphasis, then having an understanding of it is vital. To harken back to my opening sentences, look at the most productive professionals in other sports - they are students of the sport and their position or role. These athletes understand the details of their approach and are not just blindly moving along hoping it all comes together. In order to believe in your preparation you must understand it.

Staying Healthy Is Part of the Job:

Injuries and overall health is an important aspect that is often misrepresented. There is a general sentiment that injuries are often unavoidable or are a function of one’s talent package. Although some athletes are more susceptible to injuries, they should rarely be a hindrance to meeting one’s full potential. Similar to the high school runner anecdote I shared, I find myself getting frustrated and take a certain level of offense to those athletes that point to injuries for not accomplishing their goal. Not to say that runners do not get injured, or that these types of athletes are faking an injury but rather that injuries are not a good excuse for not reaching your potential. As with everything we are discussing, injuries are another area that fall within the athlete’s responsibility. Staying healthy and creating an environment for success is your responsibility - it is not your coach’s fault or your team’s fault if you overdo it or do not take the necessary steps to stay healthy.

Athletes that do not understand their training often are injured because they do not understand the type of stimulus or have a level of comprehension of the work they are performing and thus lend towards overdoing it in some area. I recall vividly an athlete I knew that was new to professional running that had just signed with a shoe company, and after receiving a gear shipment, decided to do 12 X 400 in new spikes. This was at a time of year when running fast quarters in spikes would be a bit risky to begin with, but factor in running in a new pair of spikes that were untested and it led to Achilles tendinitis. One

workout was all it took to result in months of frustration, compensation and other injuries. It is the athlete's responsibility to not make mistakes like this. It takes a concrete effort to stay healthy and a daily focus is required. From shoes to stretching, to foam rolling, massage and drills, alignment and adjustments, they are all part of the program. Being mindful of your footwear, how they complement or contradict your gait is part of staying healthy. Shoes are the most important piece of equipment and it best become an area of clear understanding if you hope to stay healthy.

A coach cannot sense how you feel or dictate what you do on your own time. They can help create a template but ultimately it falls on the athletes to follow through. The training might be perfect but if you do not constantly monitor your body and how it is responding then the training will get derailed in one session. Overuse is going to happen; the key is managing those setbacks to where they don't completely stop your progression. Look at someone like Galen Rupp. He has had his fair share of injuries and even surgeries because he is constantly pushing the physical limits in training, but he always manages to be ready when it matters most. I have never heard him use an injury as an excuse and he has two medals, American records, a major marathon win and a whole slew of National titles.

I have recently shifted my mentality related to injuries from having a simplistic view that was based on creating a framework to manage areas of weakness and working constantly to keep small injuries from becoming a hindrance. This was my primary approach; I was always in tune with how my body felt and was keen on those areas that nagged me. I got very good at managing my health but failed to be proactive to working on areas of weakness to help stop the cycle. Injuries may happen but for the most part the majority are avoidable with the proper attention, awareness and regimen.

Your Mental Approach is just as important as the physical:

The mental approach to running is a known factor in performance but is rarely talked about. As with other aspects, there are some athletes that are just born mentally tough or have the right disposition to push themselves, handle the pressure associated with performance and can keep it all in perspective. Others have to work on this more proactively and/or evolve in order to manage the changing demands athletics present. There is not one-way to approach the mental aspect, we are all wired differently, come from different backgrounds and bring a unique type of incentive to our running. Many very good runners fall short of their potential because they fail to address shortcomings in their mental readiness. This is particularly evident in major transitions - high school to college, college to professional, Top 20 national runner to making an Olympic or World Team. The physical differences are quite small when you reach the upper ranks; the greater variable is in the mental aspect.

An intentional approach to addressing the mental demands is critical if you expect to continue to evolve as a professional. It is hard to articulate the pressure and burden that accompanies trying to reach the highest level, or training for one opportunity that only comes around every four years and the intensity that carries. Let us just say it is a lot to manage and if you are not equipped, trained and ready then you will fall short.

I began focusing on running in a more significant way when I was 15 years old. My first attempt to make an Olympic Team came 9 years later. I had graduated from college 2 months earlier and won the NCAA 5000m title in my last college race. I signed with a shoe company and before I knew it, I was at the Olympic Trials testing myself against the best runners in the US. I came up short in my bid to make the team, but I had some important takeaways. One, I finished first in the prelim for the 5k and two, I led the final for the first three or four laps. Winning the prelim and leading the final are pretty much the best way to ensure you will not make a team, it was foolish from that perspective; however, my stepping out in this way proved that I was ready for the next phase emotionally and mentally, just not yet physically. The next year at the US Champs, I finished second behind Bob Kennedy and made my first of four World Track & Field Teams and two Olympic Teams. This all started with first believing I was ready for that level. Equally important was then learning the skills necessary to manage the expectations associated with a National Championship and the daily habits to ensure my mind was prepared along with my body. This takes initiative, moving out of your comfort zone, getting support in some instances and proactively addressing deficiencies.

The “Small Things” Make a Big Difference:

In this day and age, focusing on the “small things” kind of goes without saying, however, I think we should cover it just in case there is any confusion or misconception. The reality of running as a professional, by definition in 2019, involves an all-encompassing, fully comprehensive approach. Ancillary work that accompanies the daily life of high-level athletics is without question the area of the greatest evolution in the last 30 years. Just look back on the training of a sub 2:10 marathoner in the mid-80s or the world record holders of the time.

Aside from a handful of standouts like Seb Coe, the bulk of the top runners were heavily focused on their training and had a solid mental toolbox, however the ancillary elements that included nutrition, strength training, drills, stretching/mobility, hydration, core work, structural alignment, massage, routine and sleep were all substandard as compared to the modern athlete. I am sure there were other athletes of the time incorporating some of these aspects but the only one that I have seen documented was Seb Coe. Certainly, he was a significant talent but I would argue that he was ahead of his time as it related to his focus on these other aspects. This argument would lend to why his 1:41.73 World Record

stood for so long. He spent time in the weight room, did hill training and drills. Most runners of that era would never be caught doing squats or bounding up a hill. Other athletes of that timeframe were without question training hard; however, it was not as deliberate or focused and, in most instances, lacked a comprehensive approach. The modern athlete has no excuse not to include all the various elements at our disposal at this point in time. Gone are the days of just putting in hard training, this will not suffice.

When I was in college in the mid-1990s there were very few teams training at a high level. There were programs training hard or individuals training hard, but we broke the mold with the entire team putting in bigger mileage at altitude. A new standard was set over time at the collegiate level and now the top 20 programs in the country are all training at a very high level. It is no longer a few teams putting in big miles over the summer, running a hard, long run or long intense sessions - the teams that are making the next step are also incorporating ancillary work to ensure they continue to elevate their preparation. Even high school runners are being taught the importance of including these elements from the onset. There is no excuse for not taking a deliberate approach to what is often thought of as secondary elements. These aspects comprise the final 10% of preparation - They are small percentage-wise, but they are certainly not insignificant. The "Small Things" are no longer small; they are without question the difference maker.