

Chapter 10

Half Time

“My mother always used to say, ‘The older you get, the better you get, unless you’re a banana.’”

—BETTY WHITE, Actress

Martin

I met up with Malc on Friday, August 10, just nine days before the Edmonton Half Marathon, and things were going well.

I explained to Malc that leading up to the race, I wanted to stay relaxed and just do a couple of easy runs. Malc told me to keep to that and maybe do one run that’s a bit quicker, but not too long, no longer than 40 minutes at marathon pace, or slightly quicker, but not so fast as to fatigue the body. He also said that I should aim to feel as good as possible, come race day.

We then discussed pre-race warm-up, which Malc says should be pretty much the same as I did for the 5-km and 10-km races. The warm-up wakes up the body, gets the brain talking to the muscles, but should be nothing that will fatigue you going into the race. We also talked about the importance of being well hydrated. Malc said I had every reason to feel confident going into this race, as over the past month I had stayed injury free and the training had been going well.

I said that the good news was I’d been pushing things to the maximum and gone over 21 km when doing my two-hour runs, so I knew that doing the distance was not a problem. Now it was just a balancing act, of having a challenge and shooting for a deadline. As we were wrapping up the session Malc told me that, during every challenge, the body will find the limit of what it can do and you have to accept that.

Daughter Kristina, and grandsons Nathan and Matthew arrived Saturday evening, and the next morning, before Kristina and Sue were up, the boys and I headed out along the trail next to the Bow River. There’s nothing better than exploring. They found a variety of leaves and twigs, skimmed flat stones across the river and made a new path across a farmer’s field. Kris and Sue were a bit surprised when we got back but the boys had lots of tales to tell.

In the afternoon we planned some of the things we wanted to do during the week. These included: Calgary Zoo, The Grandpa tree, Cochrane pool and Splash Park, Cochrane street market, Frisbee golf, Magic show at the library, MacKay’s Ice Cream, Arts and Crafts and Canary Row.

On the Monday we tackled Canary Row, a food market and outdoor adventure park. There are a variety of stations located throughout the park, and the boys could play in themed areas designed as giant ants, bees, spiders, bats, mushrooms, a frog pond, a chicken coop and wetlands. On the way home we stopped at a Cochrane institution: MacKay’s Ice Cream store.

Malc had wanted me to do a session during the week, so on the Wednesday I headed out on the West Pointe loop. This is a 1.25-km loop and relatively flat. The session involved a warm-up of 15 minutes at a 6-minute pace, then 20 × 1 minute at a 4:10 pace and 20 × 1 minute at a 5:10 pace, finishing off with a cool-down of 10 minutes at a 6-minute pace.

I had done this type of session before and had no reason to believe that there would be any problem. I was feeling good and completed half the intervals as planned. As I was pushing the 11th interval I felt a tweak in my left calf. I slowed down and tried to run it off. As I returned to the house the knot in the calf muscle had not eased up. Rolling it and using hot and cold compresses didn't help. Maybe a night's sleep might make a difference.

Life continued and we had lots to do with Kris and the boys. The family were leaving on the Saturday and Sue and I were heading to Edmonton the same afternoon. We dropped the gang at the airport and headed on our way. I didn't know what to do. I felt that at least I had to give it a go. We had arranged to meet Malc that evening and I was feeling gutted.

Arriving at the Chateau Lacombe hotel, I decide to head out and test the calf. Not good. I had decided to pick up the race package anyway and in the expo I met John Stanton. We chatted about the smoke, which was an issue that summer. John told me that the whole event, which included a 5K, half marathon and marathon, had been in jeopardy due to the smoke, but it had cleared enough for the races to go ahead.

John Stanton

A three-kilometre fun run with his sons in 1981 was the catalyst for the then-out-of-shape, overweight John Stanton to realize he had to change his lifestyle. A food industry executive who smoked two packs of cigarettes a day, he began running secretly before dawn because he felt self-conscious about having his neighbours see "this chubby little guy" who could only run from lamp post to lamp post before having to take a walk break.

John went on to run over 60 marathons, hundreds of road races and numerous triathlons, including the Hawaiian World Championship Ironman competition. His pre-dawn runs would ultimately become John Stanton's 10:1 run/walk combination that has helped close to a million people do everything from learn to run to complete marathons, upright and smiling.

The first store was a meeting place for runners. It opened in 1984 in an 8 × 10 foot room of an old house shared with a hairdressing shop in Edmonton. More than 25 years later, the Running Room is one of North America's most recognized names in running and walking. John's two sons, John, Jr., and Jason, are now partners with John in the family-owned company, which has over 100 stores and 1,300 employees in Canada and the United States.

A best-selling Canadian author of 10 books on running and walking, John Stanton was named to Maclean's magazine's Canada Day Honour as one of 10 Canadians who are making a difference in our nation, for his contribution to health through fitness. John Stanton is a member of the Alberta Business Hall of Fame. He is a recipient of the Dr. Harold N. Segall Award of Merit, which recognized his significant contribution to the prevention of cardiovascular disease and the promotion of cardiovascular health in Canadians.

The Canadian Medical Association awarded him the Award for Excellence in Health Promotion. He is the Hon. Lt. Col. of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment (4 PPCLI) and an inductee into the Canadian

Retail Hall of Fame. John received an honorary Doctor of Laws Degree from the University of Alberta. His is a member of the Order of Canada.

An outstanding entrepreneur, with a keen interest in the health and wellness of both Canadians and Americans, John Stanton possesses a remarkable ability to inspire others and to build community.

—Excerpted from www.runningroom.com

Sue and I then tracked Malc down at the restaurant. I must admit I had a bit of a moan. It seemed like “62 beats 47” was one step forward and two steps back. I explained what had happened and that I had decided that this race would be classed as a DNS (Did Not Start) as opposed to the more commonly known DNF (Did Not Finish). I based this decision on the facts that, not only would I not be able to achieve my goal and better my PB, but it could result in further injury and I still had four more events to go. Malc supported my decision.

On race day Sue and I hung out with Malc. We chatted about the issues caused by the smoke from the forest fires that had raged through some parts of Alberta. Malc talked about how some runners are more affected than others by the smoke and that, at times like these, the treadmill is always a good option. Malc said that this had not been an easy year for running outside, due to the very cold winter, smoke and high summer temperatures. i.e., 38°C at times. It was great cheering other runners in as they crossed the finish line, but I was feeling very frustrated and it was a quiet journey back to Cochrane on the Sunday evening.

The next day I decided that I needed to take some action and booked a session of cupping with Nola at Pro-Active Health. This technique had proven successful when I’d had a calf issue in the past and I just hoped it would work again.

Cupping

Cupping is a practice used in traditional medicine in several parts of the world, including China and the Middle East. It involves creating suction on the skin using a glass, ceramic, bamboo, or plastic cup. Negative pressure is created in the cup either by applying a flame to the cup to remove oxygen before placing it on the skin or by attaching a suction device to the cup after it is placed on the skin. In “wet cupping,” the skin is pierced, and blood flows into the cup. “Dry cupping” doesn’t involve piercing the skin.

—Excerpted from US National Institutes of Health website,

<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/cupping>

I went to the Wednesday morning session feeling totally dispirited. I explained to Malc that I’d had the cupping session with Nola a few days before but there was no relief in the calf.

Malc gave me a good talking-to. He explained that he would be using a “triangle of care” to deal with this situation. I said that in the past I would go to a doctor, who might send me to a physio and then get a report, but there would be no face-to-face communication between the doctor and physio. Malc said that this would change and that he would coordinate the runner, coach and physio and they would all communicate and work together to create a triangle of care. The physio I would be working with was Evan Baldwin. I’d worked with Evan before and he was highly regarded by Malc. Malc explained that the coach is the co-ordinator of this method of working as he is the person most in contact with the athlete.

Foam Rolling

Using a foam roller, or Self Myofascial Release, is a popular technique that theoretically “releases” tight muscles and mobilizes the network of connective tissues known as fascia. Fascia was previously thought to be a simple covering or divider for the muscles and organs, but more recent research is suggesting that it may have more significant roles in force and tension transmission throughout the body.

It is believed that self-myofascial release does increase flexibility and improve range of motion. Most studies found that 1–2 minutes of rolling or other release technique is sufficient for acute increases in flexibility. The techniques can be a beneficial addition to a training routine to improve flexibility prior to an exercise bout and reduce delayed onset muscle soreness afterwards.

Races were passing me by and there was nothing I could do about it. I was scheduled to run the Dino Dash 10K on September 8, but I had to call in another DNS (Did Not Start). It was so frustrating, but Malc said I had to “trust the process.”

A huge event happened on September 16. Eliud Kipchoge set a marathon world record in Berlin at 2:01:39. I was incredibly impressed with this result, but I kept hearing about the shoes he was wearing. In this case it was again the Nike Vaporflys. I started to wonder how much of an advantage Eliud was getting with these shoes.

Doing some digging I found out that in 2016, Nike unveiled their first version of the Vaporfly, with the appending “4%” to the name. This was in reference to the energy savings and extra speed that they were claimed to provide. The development of these shoes represented the technological component of a three-year, multipronged effort to engineer a perfect marathon and break the 26.2-mile race's elusive two-hour barrier at a track in Monza, Italy. Eliud Kipchoge headlined the attempt and came just 25 seconds short—closer than most people thought he would. Was this an unfair advantage? You decide.

At the end of September Sue and I headed down to the Word on the Street Book Festival, in Lethbridge. I was there to give a presentation and do a book signing. While there, I'd joined some other runners and did a trail run, among the coulees, along the edge the Oldman River. Coulees are different landforms, all of which refer to a kind of valley or drainage zone. I had completed the 100-mile Lost Souls Ultra in 2009 and knew this area very well. I was really enjoying being back there and saw deer and a porcupine. However, after 45 minutes of running, I became concerned as I was experiencing some soreness in my previously injured calf. Within a couple of days, it was feeling back to normal.

At our next training session Malc felt that this was just my body telling me that I might have pushed too far by doing a trail run, whereas 45 minutes on a treadmill would probably not have caused any problems. In fact, Malc felt that I needed to start putting in more time, both on the treadmill and outside.

We then both discussed my upcoming trip to run in the 4th Marathon of Afghanistan. Malc was aware that I would be running a much slower race in Afghanistan, and we discussed how this might affect my calf. Malc explained that calf muscles don't like to be “on” for any length of time, as they are not very large muscles. They like to turn on and off more quickly, and running slowly can create a situation for the tendon.

If someone has calf issues, doing a slower run is a red flag because at a slower than normal pace your foot spends more time in contact with the ground and this creates tension in the calf muscle.

Malc

There was just over a week to go until the Edmonton marathon weekend, when Martin would try to better his previous PB of 1 hour 30 minutes. His training had been going well, despite the hot conditions. This event was a significant “step up” from the 5-km and 10-km distances, during which you can push your limit from the start and just hang on until you reach the finish line.

For the half marathon and marathon distances, more consistency is required. Most people will experience fluctuations of energy levels during these distances. This is why it’s necessary to control your pace and find a more regular approach. You can learn to do it by “feel,” and this will vary according to the runner, e.g., “10/10 is the max I can do, but I need to be around 7 or 8/10 and then up my pace, at the finish to 9/10.” This will give you a greater chance of finishing strong.

A tale of woe – two weeks since last vlog, during which time Martin had been up to Edmonton for the marathon weekend, with the intention of running the half marathon and aiming to beat his PB of 1:30:01. However, on the previous Wednesday, on a training run, he felt a tweak in his left calf and, despite rolling it out, had been experiencing continuing discomfort. On arriving in Edmonton, the day before the race, he went for a short run and made the decision not to take part, the following day. He based this decision on the facts that, not only would he not be able to achieve his goal and better his PB, but it could have resulted in further injury and he still had four more events. I supported Martin’s decision. There have also been some issues caused by the smoke from the forest fires that had raged through some parts of Alberta. Some runners are more affected than others by the smoke, e.g., if they suffer from asthma or another related illness. At times like these, the treadmill is always a good option. This has not been an easy year for running outside, due to the very cold winter, smoke and high summer temperatures, i.e., 38°C.

Martin was heading into the third part of his challenge and it was important that he stay on schedule, so that frustration didn’t creep in. Martin talked about chunking things down into thirds, in order to keep motivated, e.g., he’d break up a distance he had to run into sections of one-third of the distance, and he found this helped. Runners use many different strategies. It’s just a matter of finding one that fits you personally and sticking to it. There’s no exact model.

In longer runs like the marathon, as a coach I will suggest that a runner use the first few kilometres, approximately 20 minutes, to “get into the race” and establish a rhythm.

Martin was continuing on his path to recovery. For this he needed patience, the ability to follow the good advice he was being given by me and by his physiotherapist Evan, based in Calgary, who has 13 years of experience and is able to give a wide range of therapies, from manual manipulation to needling and acupuncture. Evan was the best person to deal with Martin’s soft tissue injury and keeping his activities in check. Martin was doing exercises prescribed by Evan, e.g., stretching, using a foam roller, elliptical and bike – all low-impact.

It had been three weeks since the manifestation of Martin’s injury and it was time to try a test run, without overdoing it and running the risk of complicating the situation. Martin was a little concerned as he was still experiencing some sensation in his calf when stretching, but this was probably due to scar tissue that had formed as the body’s way of protecting the area where the injury occurred. It didn’t mean that Martin hadn’t recovered sufficiently enough to be able to run. Martin would use heat and rolling to try and break down the scar tissue.

Martin mentioned his latest physiotherapy session. Evan had asked him if he'd been running and Martin said, "No, you told me not to." Apparently, Evan laughed and said, "At last, a runner who listens." I agree that it's not always the case and that some athletes will be reluctant to be totally honest when it comes to reporting on what they have or have not been doing, which is not helpful as trust between therapist and athlete has to be a two-way thing.

I was now utilizing a strategy known among coaches as "Return to Play." There are no set rules. It's the art of careful observation of the athlete, educated guessing and the use of technology to provide biomechanical data. This would compare Martin's current state to his baseline measurements, much in the way that Evan would compare Martin's injured leg to his good one.

It had been two weeks since our last vlog. Martin was feeling relieved as, having followed our agreed protocol, i.e., elliptical (zero weight-bearing) and treadmill and the stretching and rolling regime, he had turned the corner with his injury and was ready for an outdoor run. Martin brought up the topic of Eliud Kipchoge and the fact that on the previous Sunday, on September 16, in Berlin, he had set a new marathon world record in a time of 2:01:39, which was 1 minute, 18 seconds faster than the previous record.

I've talked to Eliud on a number of occasions and know that his training is not sophisticated, just a lot of repetition, and there are runners who have naturally higher VO2max and lactate levels. In Kipchoge's case, it's all down to psychology and this is what sets him apart. When Kipchoge enters a race, his goal is not to beat the record time, but simply to run as fast as he possibly can. Some studies suggest that there are times when athletes might enter a subconscious state during a race. To find out more about this, I suggested Martin read work done by Professor Samuele Marcora, at the University of Kent, UK, and Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, from Claremont Graduate University in the US.

Remember that the Canadian men's marathon record has stood for 42 years and anyone wanting to break it must first understand what Kipchoge went through. He's not like some other runners who focus purely on breaking that record time. He just knows he has to run as fast as he can, be consistent and stay focused. Martin asked if I think the sub-two-hour marathon will be achieved within the next five years. I don't think so, Martin does, so we have a \$10 wager – watch this space!

Martin normally runs a marathon in intervals of "nine and ones," i.e., run nine minutes, walk one minute, and he wondered if he should change this to "seven and ones" and run at a quicker pace, maybe 5:30. This sounds like a good strategy and one I would feel much happier with, due to Martin being in recovery mode. In fact, it's something I would recommend to any runner returning from injury, and also it's better mentally.

Everyone has a natural gait pattern or rhythm, where our running mechanics perform better, and when returning from injury, you want to come back running at a pace where your gait is performing at its best, mechanically. If you come back too slow, you will have a tendency to shuffle, which can change certain aspects of your gait and, consequently, hinder recovery.

When looking at issues with certain parts of the body, like the knee, if you spend more time under load, it can slow recovery time. These are parts of the body that are made to act in a more springy, dynamic way; they want to fire the muscles on and then quickly relax. What they don't want to do is fire them on and then have to hold them there.

So, I was happy for Martin to use this new strategy and also suggested it's a good idea to have a plan B. If the unforeseen should occur, it's best to know how you're going to adapt to a situation, rather than having to make quick, panicky decisions. For example, should Martin's old injury flare up during the run, he could tell himself it's okay to just walk the rest of the way. Martin said he'd already given this some thought and it was reassuring to know he had a seven-hour cut-off time, so he could easily walk it if necessary. If need be, he wouldn't hesitate to do so, especially as he had to bear in mind that he still had his "62 bets 47" half marathon and marathon to do, before the end of the year.