Chapter 6

Malc Kent: The Evolution of the Running Specialist (Part 1 of 2)

"The excitement of learning separates youth from old age. As long as you're learning you're not old."

—ROSALYN SUSSMAN YALOW, physicist and Nobel Prize winner

During my time at university and my time experimenting with training methods I had also had my first taste of coaching and helping others. The truth was that the culture around me, at that time, had been one of mutual coaching, everyone learning and swapping learnings and helping each other. Although I had my own ambitions there was always a part of me that naturally wanted to help others and see them improve. And I took pretty much every opportunity I got to coach, paid or unpaid.

When people ask me about where the coaching and training curiosity first occurred, I go way back to when I was 14 or 15 living at home with my parents, running with the local club and playing a lot of rugby. At 14, I was playing rugby for my school, town and county and really loving it. But the problem was that the other players were all growing at a rate of knots and I wasn't. So I got shuffled around to different playing positions that were better suited for a kid smaller in height. The truth was that I was having to use every trick in the book to keep up with the tackles, still assert myself on the pitch and stay out of hospital.

So, frustrated by what was happening, I started to build my own strength training gym in the front of my mum and dad's garage. Using various tools and spare parts from my dad's workshop as well as free equipment from friends, I created something good enough and big enough to make a difference. I believe I would have finished my time playing rugby at 14 if not for that home gym. But instead I was able to play another season, be part of a tour of the south of France and play in the final of the *Daily Mail* schools cup at Twickenham in London. I was even able to spin off the gym into running strength training sessions and helping runners at the local running club to strength train too.

This approach of wanting to build my own training labs for testing and refining training methods has been at the heart of my philosophy ever since. The big issue for me going forward was going to be funding the creation of such places.

After university my first stint of "real" work was as an applied scientist in the conventional energy sector. The beauty of directing my job focus in this direction was that I could achieve several goals in one. I could indulge my love of science and learn to become an expert at collecting and analyzing data, I could pay the bills and get the time off I needed to climb internationally, and I could afford to build my own custom training facilities. And, so it was that I began doing just that and, from 2008, competing regularly in national championships, world cups and world championships in climbing.

In 2009 I moved with my now wife, Kat, to Copenhagen, Denmark, to work for the shipping giant A.P. Moller-Maersk as a scientist.

How Malc Met Kat

The story that I and my wife have woven over 15 years has taken us on quite a few adventures in several countries, but it really all began back in Stavanger in Norway in 2005. We both found ourselves on a company course there for a week, her the engineer and me the scientist. Coming at life and problem solving from two completely different perspectives. Our love was definitely something that blossomed over time.

After our week in Norway we both went back to Scotland to work our regular jobs and soon realized that we actually lived quite close to one another. With Kat having just recently moved there and not knowing as many people our age as me, she often joined in with organized evening socials with my already established peer group. Over the course of the next six months we became closer and closer.

I have to say that Kat was incredibly considerate and patient in those early days as I would often be away on international trips for recreation and competition. And weekends were anything but relaxing as I would often want to get out into the mountains for one thing or another. But we flexed and made it work and we grew better for it.

I think the handmade glass sculpture that we got from the Murano Glass Factory in Venice at our wedding really encapsulates the kind of journey we went on over the first six years. The glass work depicts two abstract figures who are beautifully adapting to each other in harmony, in different ways but

in the same overall direction. I still marvel today at the glass master's ingenious combination of simplicity and deep meaning.

Whereas I had previously been adapting existing training gyms, this move gave me my first opportunity to start from an empty warehouse and build a training centre totally from scratch. At the gym that I developed close to the airport in Copenhagen, I trained exhaustively and constantly tested physical and mental training methods. Of the many areas that underwent my scrutiny was the concept of how best to make the transition from training to competition as seamless as possible. My goal was to make training feel like competition and competition feel like training.

Another area I really delved into was how to deal with the demands of long-haul global travel, for back-to-back competitions. This was a particular problem in competition climbing, as the scheduling of competitions would often mean I would have to travel between Europe, Asia and North America in quick succession and somehow turn up to a competition awake enough to perform well. I can recall some seasons where for organizational reasons the schedule was particularly brutal.

In 2010 we travelled to Russia for a first competition there. This was less than a week after a competition in the US. The jet lag was bad, to say the least, and the journey through Russia just added to the stress. Halfway through the train ride from Moscow to Kirov, in the middle of the night, while everyone on board was trying to get some sleep, the train came to a halt. We were told that one of the carriages had derailed and we would be stuck in the middle of nowhere in central Russia in the darkness and −30°C for at least two hours.

I can recall another time travelling from Scotland to Romania for a competition, when a freak snowstorm shut down the city and the airport. We battled to get out in a taxi through the snow only to get to the airport and find that all the flights that day were cancelled. We eventually came back to the airport the next day and got a flight. But to the Netherlands rather than Romania. After layovers and flight changes, we eventually got to Bucharest at 1 a.m. with all the car rental companies closed.

Two hours later we managed to arrange a less-than-legit rental car (accompanied by a one-page handwritten rental agreement) and drove through the night via numerous dangerous mountain passes in a half-asleep state in order to get to the competition site at 8 a.m. The registration closed at 8 sharp and the competition began at 9. I can tell you that just getting through the qualifying section was a mission in itself.

Many of the lessons I learned during those years have stood me in good stead ever since, not just with my own endeavours but in helping other athletes achieve their goals. During a long period up to 2014 I competed for my country 31 times internationally in world cups and world championships. Sometimes it went smoothly and I was able to hold my own against the best in the world, and sometimes it became a chain reaction of cluster screw-ups that annihilated any chance of a good result. But every time something good or something bad happened it was a chance for me to learn more about how to unlock the door to consistent high performance – a subject I've obsessed over for at least two decades.

My journey into the world of biomechanics and assessment of movement patterns in sports began during this period of self-directed research and testing, at my own training centres. Not content with just validating concepts in the lab, I sometimes went to events as a non-athlete and performed studies. In one year where I had decided for logistical and life reasons not to compete myself I travelled to a world championship event in Switzerland armed with cameras, a computer and measuring equipment. For the

four days of the championships I measured every athlete I could and videoed every performance possible, from the qualifying events to the finals. I spent weeks afterwards poring over the data to pull out the trends and make sense of why a large number of the athletes were doing the same kind of training but only a tiny number were consistently making the podiums.

An inevitable consequence of this in-depth study was the realization of just how much of the end result was attributable to mental factors. And I could attest to this myself. By this time I had now travelled to Russia, Italy, Spain, France, Austria, the Netherlands, the US, Japan, Korea and South Africa to spend time with the world's best, learn their training methods and pull all the best bits into a kind of integrated, super-training protocol.

So why, then, armed with this in my toolbox, didn't I go on to dominate the world and win 20+ world cups? Simply, it kept coming down to the fact that the top figures in the sport seemed to always have a fractional mental edge over me when it mattered. Never was this more apparent than in Bozeman, Montana, where I flipped between dominating the competition with ease to making an elementary error and falling way back in the rankings, in the final.

Of course, this concept of turning up to a competition or event in a frame of mind that allows you to do your best work when it really matters and the stakes are high isn't anything new. It's been known for a long time to be the difference between those who achieve what they want in sport and those who fall short. Lucky for me, then, that in 2013 I was offered the chance to do something that would profoundly change my perspective on challenges and stick with me ever since.

Prior to 2013 I had been fortunate to work with a number of leading companies that had an interest in human performance, but none of them, even The North Face, came close to Red Bull and what they were doing in the field. I had really admired their philosophy of connecting together the world's top extreme and adventure sports athletes and partnering with them to learn more about the limits of human performance. Serendipitously for me, a guy called Michael Gervais was thinking the same way and was equally keen to pull together understanding from different areas of extreme sports. In his language, he felt this arena was the ultimate real world lab in which to delve deep into flow state and higher states of consciousness in general.

In 2013 and 2014, during my time working with Mike and his partner Adam, through the Red Bull Mental Edge project in California, I learned a huge amount about, first, understanding my own tendencies and, second, refining how to shift mental states to those more optimal for the type of performance required at that time. A lot of the measurements and tests involved high-capacity tasks under high stress. This was the state in which Mike believed it was possible to learn the most about someone's true nature and instinctive reaction, and see how the subject broke down first.

This is a principle that has been central to how I have performed running gait analysis since 2014, as I've touched on in more detail elsewhere in this book. I also similarly believe that the runner needs to be put under some amount of stress and challenge in order to truly get deep insights into how that runner breaks down, albeit in this case mechanically rather than mentally. This period of working both onsite and remotely with Mike and Adam occurred at a time of pivoting for me.

In 2014 I retired from competition climbing and immediately began dedicating my time back to the sport of running, which for the preceding three years had been overshadowed by climbing but at the same time had been calling out for my attention. I'd been coaching runners locally for several years in my spare time and had helped companies like Garmin to field test and develop their running technology products.

I had also been quietly learning my craft in running gait and biomechanical analysis, pulling on my deep understanding of physics and mechanics and my years of assessing movement patterns in more complex sports.
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