

# **The Athlete/Coach Relationship: The Athlete's Viewpoint**

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In *Athletes Only***

When I was a freshman at Georgetown University I sat down with my coach, Juli Henner, to discuss my goals both for the year and for my career in general. It was an odd discussion – verbalizing for the first time all my dreams and aspirations. I told her whatever we did; I wanted it to advance me toward that goal of becoming the best miler in the world. That's what we've worked toward in the past and that's what we'll continue to work on in 2008 and beyond. Juli had the foresight to see that I wanted to achieve things that wouldn't come until well into after my collegiate years, and she structured my training around that fact. Right from the start, she told me I'd have to be patient and wait for my time to come. Greatness in middle and long distance running is a long, slow, hard journey that doesn't happen overnight. It comes only after you put in the hard work.

Five years after we started, Juli constantly reminds me that it takes time and patience to get to the level I want to be at. The human body needs years of training to improve performance by even 1%. I am 23 right now and I know I might not reach my full potential for another 4 or 5 years. People have always told me that anything worth achieving in life is worth working and waiting for. No one ever told me how difficult that theory would be in practice.

I've made huge progressions every year and I thought naturally 2007 would be the year I would continue my progression into the realm of truly world-class. That didn't happen, and it's something that frustrated me to no end throughout the season. I was unwilling to let go of the fact that greatness is a struggle and not a gift, while reminding myself that anything worth achieving in the sport was worth working harder and harder for.

Until 2007, each season developed in a similar fashion; I would set a goal and then go about training my body to push itself as far as it could go and then, voila! Mission accomplished! This past year was the first time I had to deal with the disappointment of not meeting my expectations and goals. I finished 4<sup>th</sup> at the US Outdoor Championships and missed making the team for the World Championships by one place. Even worse was knowing that there was nothing else I could have done to get myself ready.

I never missed a run or a weight room session. Every week and day of training was like clockwork. For the first time in my life I had the confidence that I was training harder than or as hard as anyone else in the world. I knew that barring injury there was nothing that would keep me from reaching my goals. I remember crossing the finish line at the US Championships in fourth place and having tears involuntarily flow down from my eyes.

I had put everything into my preparation for that race. It was as if the world had collapsed in front of me that day and all the hard work I had done since the beginning of my career seemed fruitless. I was in the best shape of my life and I held onto the notion that if I was in shape that it was all that mattered.

I chose to continue racing even while not racing at my best. And it was at my last race of the season, the Continental Airlines Fifth Avenue Mile, that I was finally able to forget about the past and come to the conclusion that what happened in 2007 was only a temporary misstep on my path to reach even larger goals.

I was just so excited to be out there on that day that I led the race and pushed the pace from the start (of 1600meters) until the last 200meters. Ultimately this ruined my chances of winning the race, but it gave me the confidence and sense of freedom that I hadn't experienced the entire year.

I love this sport for everything it has to offer. Good days and bad days are just part of the drama. Even the best athletes have bad days. Juli always says that no matter how great or how poorly you run in a race, the ultimate goal is to take something away that you can learn from and perfect so that the next time is always better.

No matter how good you are, there must always be a commitment to finding your limits and never being satisfied with mediocrity. This sport is unrelenting. There will always be someone who can run faster, jump higher, or throw farther than you can. Track and field is a stage set for some of the most dramatic performances imaginable. Every athlete will sooner or later face adversity similar to what I faced in 2007. When you watch an Olympic final you can bet that every runner on the starting line can tell you a similar story of disappointment and struggle on the way to glory and fame.