

Maximizing Your Potential

The Simple Strategy for Changing Your Life

By Paul Karasik



Maximizing your potential and changing your life requires focus, commitment, and energy. It also requires proven strategies. By accident, while pursuing my favorite pastime, competitive running, I discovered a strategic approach that works.

At the time I was living in New York and there were lots of races that I could enter. These were all mega events with thousands of runners. Although I was a decent runner, in order to win or at least get a medal, I would need a different kind of strategy.

Luckily I discovered a very simple strategy that worked. I would research upcoming races and find a race with about 20 participants of which 18 were likely to be totally out of shape. They were usually races with beer in the title, such as Run for Beer 10K.

Using this approach, I had a really good chance of finishing in the top three.

So I found this 10K race tucked away in the beautiful Cumberland Mountains in Hagerstown, Maryland. Actually it wasn't in the raging metropolis of Hagerstown, with 39,000 people. The race was being held in a sleepy rural suburb called Halfway, which had a population of about 9,000 people, total. The area also featured an abundance of taverns. Based upon these logistics, I was confident I had a decent chance to finish with a medal.

Race day morning arrived without a cloud in the sky. It was a perfect spring morning with a temperature that was cool and inviting for a foot race. I arrived bright and early at the race location starting line to find myself surrounded by lots of local families. Most of the runners, who had their numbers pinned on their chests, appeared relaxed without even an inkling of the "eye of the tiger."

There also were a group of runners who had a look of concern on their

faces. Based upon their obvious lack of fitness level, they looked like they were just hoping to complete the 6.2-mile distance and enjoy the beer and barbecue that would be part of the post-race festivities.

As I approached the starting line I became even more confident. True to my plan, there were only about 20 people. Of these 20, half were children under 12. My confidence was rising in concert with the morning sun. Things kept looking brighter and brighter.

So there I was, standing at the starting line waiting for the gun to go off. I'm dressed in the most fashionable running apparel — I've got a hi-tech watch on my wrist and new \$200 running shoes on my feet. I'm the cutting edge of cool. The only thing missing is the medal that would soon be hanging on a ribbon around my neck.

I turned to my right and introduced myself to the tall smiling runner who was with his young daughter, who would also be running the race. "Hi, my name is Paul." To which he replied, "Hi, my name is Clarence." Unlike me, Clarence was dressed low tech, in Bermuda shorts and footwear that appeared to be something one step up from flip-flops. He was definitely a Cumberland Mountains local. You can guess who beat whom to the finish line. That's not the point of this story, though. The important part is what happened during the race.

The gun goes off and we are loping along at a nice pace, well out in front of most of the rest of the field. The road we were running on took us on a comfortable journey up and down

rolling hills and beautiful green countryside. To the right and left of Clarence and me were large, well-manicured estate properties with perfectly landscaped lawns.

Clarence and I were pacing each other all the while enjoying the clean, sweet smell of green in the air and the joy of the moment. We are about three miles into the race, when all of a sudden from the back of one of these impressive brick residences a dog of massive proportions appeared. I believe the breed was Mountain Lion.

Unlike us runners, it was apparent he was not enjoying his day. We knew this was true because he was charging towards us like a wild hyena, barking expletives, teeth bared and spit spewing from his mouth. It was clear he was on a mission to destroy us.

Clarence sees the dog running straight at us, and immediately runs off the course straight at our predator, throwing air punches that would have had Mohammed Ali dancing.

It was clear Scooby-Doo's evil twin wanted no part of Clarence or his current running partner. Somewhat humiliated, the defeated dog raced off back to his lair behind the house.

In a few seconds, Clarence quickly gets back on pace next to me without missing a beat. With an air of embarrassment, he confided, "Paul, I feel bad, I didn't want to scare him, but he didn't give me a choice." I quickly voiced my support with, "Clarence, don't worry, you did a good thing. Let's just chalk it up to tough love."

So now it's more than 35 years of running later. I've run in all 50 states in America and all over the world. I run in junkyards, parks, through forests, over mountains, across deserts and neighborhoods in which many people would be afraid to walk.

I've had a variety of athletic accomplishments. But if you asked me which I'm most proud of, it

wouldn't be the medals or trophies I've won. It wouldn't be the more than 20 marathons, or twelve 50-mile races or the 100-mile race I've completed.

What I'm most proud of in more than 35 years of running is the fact I've never been bitten by a dog.

Now this isn't to say dogs haven't attacked me. I've had a lot of dogs run at me. But in each and every case I applied the strategy I learned from Clarence. When the dog runs at you, you have to run at the dog.

What's really interesting is, like Clarence, I've never made contact with any of the dogs I've had to run at. Dogs have fear triggers regardless of how big they are. When they see a crazy, half-naked man, screaming, shaking his fist, and running at them, they let him pass. They would just as soon wait for a more passive, less aggressive victim.

There are a few key elements in this story that make it particularly relevant as a metaphor for how to successfully make change in one's life.

- **THE FIRST ELEMENT**, a common thread for both running at the dog and making change, is the presence of a clear finish line or

goal. In running, speed is the goal. The goal in changing your life — a new desired state.

- **THE SECOND KEY ELEMENT** is danger that appears quickly. In the pursuit of any goal, dangers and obstacles appear out of nowhere and need to be addressed quickly to avoid being negatively affected. Likewise, the response to threats needs to be implemented quickly.
- **THE THIRD RELEVANT FEATURE** of this story is the need for people to associate with others for advice and support. Success is rarely a solo event. Success in any area requires a team of some kind.

This could be a literal support group or it could be a coach, mentor, trainer, teacher, consultant or expert in a very specific area of expertise.

The moral of this story is simple: to succeed in "winning the race," you must be willing to face associated issues, challenges and problems head on. Rarely does anyone succeed in making changes without the courage to run at the dogs.



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