

“When you were in a race with Alan, you knew it was going to be a fight to the finish. I know he made me better than who I was.”

—MEB KEFLEZIGHI

# RUN

## LIKE A CHAMPION

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AN OLYMPIAN'S APPROACH  
FOR EVERY RUNNER

ALAN CULPEPPER

with BRIAN METZLER

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Foreword by Meb Keflezighi

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# INTRODUCTION

## **AN OLYMPIAN'S APPROACH TO RUNNING**

*It's 2 p.m. on Friday, July 14, 2000. In about six hours, I will be running the final of the 10,000-meter run at the U.S. Olympic Trials in Sacramento, California. I am staying in a DoubleTree hotel, not much different from all the other hotels I have stayed in at other races in the early years of my professional running career, but this time it feels much, much different. Not the hotel itself but the unfamiliar overpowering press of emotion and anxiety that feels a little like suffocating as I sit on the bed and wait for what is coming in a few hours' time. I am 27 years old and have competed in hundreds of races since I was a kid, but nothing of this magnitude. I competed in the 5,000-meter run at the 1996 U.S. Olympic Trials in Atlanta, but the pressure wasn't there because I was fresh out of college and didn't think I had any chance to finish in the top three and make the U.S. team. Perhaps back then I was young and naive, or maybe exhausted from a long college season that had concluded with my winning the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) title in the 5,000 meters. Whatever it was, it was different from what I am experiencing in Sacramento. This time the feeling is of being in the midst*

*of something surreal, like a dream. And in a very real sense, it is a dream, realized. When I was 15, I wrote on a piece of spiral-notebook paper that I wanted to make the U.S. Olympic team in track and field. The goal I set for myself some 12 years ago is, today, right in front of me.*

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The U.S. Olympic Trials are without question the most intense and stressful event I have ever been a part of as a runner. You have prepared for four long years for a single day, a single race, where everyone on the start line has the single common goal of finishing among the top three. There are typically five or six athletes in every middle-distance and long-distance race who have a legitimate shot at making the team, based on their previous experience, and there are also a few wild cards whom no one expects to make the Olympic team who wind up running really well under pressure. But the difference between running well and making the Olympic team can be light-years apart. Making an Olympic team doesn't happen by accident or fluke but instead is a function of several factors. First you have to qualify for the trials by hitting a USA Track and Field (USATF) time standard. Next you have to finish in the top three in your race on that given day. Finally, if you haven't already, you need to hit an Olympic-qualifying time standard dictated by the International Association of Athletic Federations (IAAF). This time standard is much quicker than the USATF qualifying time to reach the trials—so in theory, you could finish in the top three in your race but not earn a spot on the U.S. Olympic team.

In 1996, I had taken a significant step toward my dream by qualifying for the Olympic Trials. When I qualified that year, I was fresh off a thrilling win of the NCAA 5,000 title in Eugene, Oregon. No one aside from my then girlfriend and now wife knew that I was battling a chest cold that day that had me coughing during the race, trying desperately to release the junk building in my lungs. With 500 meters to go, I bolted

to the front, having hung off the pace for the entire race. After taking the lead, I held on to win with a 56-second last lap in the final race of my college career.

I came into the 1996 trials not favored to make the team and not fully grasping what it meant to compete at that level. This was the first race I had ever competed in where I was so thickly surrounded by professionals of the sport. Those guys were my idols—guys I had followed, read about, and watched for years. Guys like Pat Porter, who was nearing the end of an incredible career and whose pictures from *Track & Field News* I had pinned to my wall during high school. And Bob Kennedy, the favorite that day, was the American record holder in the event and on the verge of becoming the first U.S. runner to ever break the 13-minute barrier for the 5,000. (At the time, my best time in the 5,000 was the 13:31 I had recorded at the Mt. Sac Relays a few months earlier.)

At those 1996 trials, I ran in a way that left no doubt that I was ready for the next step, showing a level of confidence and nerve that surprised even me. I won my preliminary race, which qualified me for the final, and then, two days later, I led for several laps of the final. Neither tactic is advisable, especially for a young, inexperienced runner, and they exposed my immaturity. I wound up a distant 10th of 16 runners in the final, but I left Atlanta encouraged. I had proved that I was not afraid to be there, to run in the front, to compete against the nation's best, and to put myself in a position to win.

During the next three years, I continued to improve on that performance and showed that I was ready and capable of making the next step. In 1997, just a year after finishing 10th at the 1996 Olympic Trials, I finished as the runner-up in the 5,000 at the U.S. Track and Field Championships and earned my first chance to represent the United States in the World Championships in Athens, Greece. In 1999, I won national titles in both cross country and the 10,000 on the track, and I

advanced to the World Championships in each one. By 2000, I was in a different position altogether than I had been in 1996 going into the U.S. Olympic Trials. I was no longer an unknown quantity or an inexperienced runner; this time I was heavily favored to make the team, and that changed every aspect of the experience. Instead of going into the race with no expectations (as in 1996), this time there were huge expectations. I was an established runner with a pro contract, and it was imperative that I make the team. But I knew that a lot of very good American runners had gone their entire careers without making it to the Olympics and that there was no such thing as a sure thing or any guarantee of a second chance later in my career. As far as I was concerned, this was it.

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*I sit on the bed in my room at the DoubleTree, trying to calm my mind and stomach. I tell myself I have prepared for 15 years for this moment, that I am healthy, that my training has gone well, that I am ready, and that I have no excuse not to run well.*

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The truth is, sometimes having no excuses is tougher than having to make one; after all, excuses come in handy—a minor injury, a sore throat, or something as mundane as a pair of socks that rub and cause irritation. It is not uncommon for runners to have something come up right before a significant race. Not something that keeps them from competing but rather something small that lets them off the hook emotionally by giving them a mental out. It is a kind of coping mechanism to help you handle the disappointment in case the thing you really want doesn't go the way you want it to. It's human nature, and we've all done it, but such escape hatches won't further your cause or get you to your goal. The greatest athletes I have known or read about don't give in to

excuses, whether real or imagined. Rather, they want everything in their preparation to have gone well, with no issues or variables distracting their focus.

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*The years, the experiences, the physical preparation, the sacrifices, the details, the thinking, thinking, thinking about this moment—and now it is about to happen. My day to this point has gone the way race day typically does: sleeping in as best I could (which is always hard to do because as soon as you are even remotely awake, you realize where you are and remember what is coming); a short jog followed by my usual stretching routine; rehydration and eating my one significant meal of the day; then lying around the hotel for hours, trying to relax. Now it's 2 p.m., and I am sitting on the bed. As the credits begin to roll on a movie I have just finished watching, I start to fully recognize the enormity of this moment. I barely paid attention to that movie—it was just something to kill time. It wasn't the movie that led to a rush of emotions but simply the combination of the music playing at the end of it and my feeling utterly overwhelmed. I cannot hold in my emotions anymore; they have to come out, and do they ever. Twenty-seven years old, alone and sobbing in my hotel room. This is the first time I have ever been so emotional before a race. Always nervous, yes, and fully aware of how emotional racing can be, but never at this level. I am suddenly flooded with fears: scared of what is in front of me, scared that I won't run to my potential, scared that I am going to return to this DoubleTree disappointed with the outcome. I say a prayer asking for strength, for courage, and not necessarily for the win but rather to simply run knowing I did my best.*

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I've struggled and made my share of mistakes along the way, but the ace up my sleeve is that I've always handled the pressure to perform

well. Even as a teen, just starting out and on the cusp of grasping how good I could be, I was able to run my best when it counted. This ability to handle intense situations is, along with the physical attributes, part of a person's given talent package. However, just like physical trainability, mental skills can be honed. I received excellent instruction in this when I was introduced to the sport of running and continued learning it throughout my impressionable college years. My first coach, Sam Walker, gave me a solid foundation on which to build, both physically and mentally, and Coach Mark Wetmore encouraged my progression at the University of Colorado. I remember being in high school, running inside the University of Texas Stadium in Austin at the state meet. I was 16 years old. There were 25,000 parents, coaches, athletes, family members, and other fans in the stands, a massive stage for a young man, and I was able to rise to the occasion and compete at my best. I was in a similar situation as a college senior at the NCAA meet in Eugene. The crowds in Eugene are famous for their enthusiasm, knowledge, and excitement during a race. Being there was even more incredible than I had imagined, but again, I was able to manage my emotions and perform my best that day. I might be as proud of that as I am of the podium finish.

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*By the time I get to the track later that evening, my nerves have settled. Being at the track, even though there are thousands of fans and a lot of commotion, is much better than being alone in a hotel room. I go through my typical warm-up routine—which is hardly necessary because it is pretty warm—and get ready to race. There are still some butterflies leading up to the start of the race, but my confidence is increasing by the minute. I trust my training, feel good, and am ready to do what I have come to do.*

*When the race gets under way, Abdi Abdirahman is one of several athletes to set a solid pace, along with Meb Keflezighi, Brad Hauser, and Jim Jurcevich. I mix it up in the early going too as we come through the 5,000-meter halfway mark in 14:11, but it is Keflezighi sitting behind Abdirahman out in front. With eight laps to go (roughly 2 miles), Keflezighi surges a bit with a couple of fast laps that give him a bit of a lead. I know I have to be aggressive and stay in contact if I want to finish in the top three, but I don't want to be too aggressive. With five laps to go, I push past Abdirahman with Brad Hauser on my heels and find myself about 50 meters behind Keflezighi. After shaking Hauser, I continue to gain ground on Keflezighi, but I'm still quite a ways back with a lap to go. That's when I summon every ounce of energy I can muster and unleash a massive finishing kick in pursuit of victory. Between the time I left the hotel and the start of the final lap of the race, the wavering emotion and nervousness I was experiencing have been replaced by a sharply focused understanding of how I can grasp the opportunity in front of me. And in that moment, the fatigue and strain of my body seem to melt away as a feeling of complete exhilaration overtakes my mind and body. It's as if I'm running on air, barely touching the ground with my spikes. As I come off the final turn to the homestretch, Keflezighi is sprinting too. I have enormous momentum and know he is within reach. The mad dash to the finish line is a culmination of all of my hard work and preparation over the previous four years. I am flying down the track, and so is Keflezighi. It is going to be a photo finish!*

*In the end, I run out of real estate, and Keflezighi nips me by less than one-tenth of a second. It is the slimmest of margins for a 25-lap race that took 28 minutes to complete. But, as much as I would love to have won that race, I am OK with how it worked out. Even though I didn't win, there is no question that I ran one of the best races of my life against some of the best runners in the country. I gave my all, competed to the very end, and achieved my goal of making the U.S. Olympic team that will be headed to*

*Sydney, Australia, in two months for the Games of the XXVIIth Olympiad. After years of training, learning, growing, progressing, and never relenting in what I believed, I have fulfilled a lifelong dream and become an Olympian.*

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Isn't that what we all want out of our pursuits in this sport? To run to our potential? To run in such a way that we know we gave our best effort? To run knowing that we could not have run any better on the day when it counted? To not return to the DoubleTree disappointed with the results? Whether you are trying to qualify for a regional meet in high school cross country, qualify for the Boston Marathon, beat your personal best in your next half-marathon, or break 3 or 4 hours in a marathon for the first time, as committed runners we all have the same desire to meet our potential, to feel that we gave our best on that day. The feelings are the same no matter what your level, background, or current personal record (PR). Sure, the intensity and pressure to perform are heightened when trying to make an Olympic team or when running is your livelihood, but ultimately we all want the same result.

Great performances and the ability to perform when it matters most to you or when the stakes are high do not happen by accident. My club coach, Sam, always said, "Be ready when it counts," and interestingly enough, Mark Wetmore reiterated the same phrase in my college years. That phrase not only has stuck with me but has been the central focus of my entire career.

I have been fortunate to have been able to pursue running as a career, and one of the aspects I am most proud of during my time as a pro is my consistency across those years. I managed to stay at the top of the U.S. ranks for almost 10 years without any lapses or years where I just did not run well or did not perform well at the nationals. I finished in the top three in the U.S. National Championships in the 5,000,

10,000, marathon, and/or cross country from 1997 through 2007, and as a result, I never missed an opportunity to earn a spot on an Olympic or world championships team in the event I was focusing on. That consistency is one of the things in my career that I'm most proud of—mostly because I know consistent performance across time isn't something I lucked into or that happened because I was the most genetically gifted. Rather, I achieved that consistency because I understood that being ready when it counts is a function of aspects outside an athlete's training regimen. Being able to perform well year after year is more than just executing long runs, tempo runs, speed work, and hill repeats. In order to reach your full potential, you have to think beyond the training and envision a more comprehensive approach.

There have been countless discussions in training books—many full of great insight and knowledge—on what is required to perform at a particular level. This book is not a training book in that sense. Rather, it is meant to be a guide or a template of how to formulate a consistently winning approach, whatever your ability level. Most of the greatest distance runners of our time have adopted these principles whether they realized it or not. I say *most* great distance runners because some have unfortunately fallen short of their potential, in large part because they failed to recognize the often underscrutinized areas that needed improving—not necessarily training adaptations but other aspects we will discuss in this book. There are also those few supremely talented runners who are great despite themselves, but inevitably, and almost without exception, their careers are cut short by a lack of proper balance.

I have learned some very important lessons from these and other high-level runners with whom I shared the stage over the years, some of whose stories I will share in the chapters that follow. Those who came before me, and my own experiences, have taught me much, and this for sure: There are no secret training programs, no gimmicks, no magical

workouts or catchy mantras that will alone take you to your best performance. I wish it were that simple. Most of us are ready and very willing to work hard and unafraid to do what it takes. But the reality is that consistent, great performance comes out of more than simply training. A holistic methodology must be adopted. It requires an all-encompassing viewpoint, not an all-consuming but a comprehensive thought process that helps you, the athlete and the person, fully develop your potential. Limiting your mind-set to just the training will inevitably limit your performance. Of course the training is extremely important, and I will go into a detailed explanation of the key components and, as importantly, the timing of those components. The reality, however, is that we are complex creatures with complex minds and lives. We should not limit our approach to strictly the physiological because that gets at only a portion of the far bigger, far more wonderful and complex picture of who we are and who we can be as athletes.

Let me be very clear that the insights shared in this book come from my personal experiences and those of other athletes whom I competed against or whom I know well. I have been fortunate to be professionally involved with the sport of running for 25 years. I started as a young boy, and there have been no periods since that time when running has not played a major part in my life. I consider myself to be highly perceptive, not only when it comes to internal reflection but also with other athletes whom I have admired as idols or competed against as rivals. I have also coached numerous recreational runners and discovered common themes worth reflecting on. I am not a sports psychologist, not a doctor, not a physical therapist, chiropractor, or physiologist. My expertise is based on applied science: living and feeling what I will share in the coming chapters. I have a very good comprehensive understanding of all the areas we will cover but do not presume to be an expert on any area.

At the end of the day, my objective is simple: to help others be successful, to help them feel the profound satisfaction that comes from

accomplishing a difficult goal. I want to meet you right where you are and come alongside your efforts, perhaps expose a few areas that need improving, which will allow you to continue your progression and achieve personal satisfaction and greatness in your performance.

In 2007, I won U.S. national cross country championships at age 34, at a time in my career when it is safe to say I was considered beyond my prime. That race stands out personally as a highlight of my career. I ran like a true veteran, a professional, with patience and confidence. There were several younger American standouts in that race, and, in fact, three different runners led that race in the early going. But I prevailed by trusting my training, running my own race, and following my well-honed instincts. My effort was the culmination of all the aspects that I will share in this book, an application of the various elements that are required in order to run to your potential no matter how long you have been running or how fast you have been to this point. Whether you are brand-new to running or well beyond your supposed prime, young or old, the principles are the same. This road map should unlock areas of weakness in your overall preparation and expose aspects you might not have considered. My hope and goal here are to equip you to truly go after your own goals and fulfill your potential to run like a champion.

# The BEST PRACTICES of the BEST RUNNERS

Two-time Olympian Alan Culpepper is one of America's most accomplished and versatile runners. He knows what it takes to compete at the highest level.

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