

WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE OLYMPICS

BY ALAN CULPEPPER

I was fortunate to qualify for two Olympics: the 2000 Sydney Games, where I competed in the 10,000-meter run on the track, and in 2004 in Athens, where I ran the marathon. I had two markedly different experiences and learned lessons that I applied through the remainder of my career. While I realize the opportunity to run in the Olympics is very rare, we all share the same goal of running our best when it matters most. The key is in understanding what circumstances you perform best under, and learning how to re-create that environment.

HOW TO USE DISAPPOINTMENT AS MOTIVATION

Four days before the 10,000m in Sydney, I came down with the flu. Fever, congestion, coughing and laid up in bed was far from the ideal lead-up to racing with the best athletes in the world. Not surprisingly, I ran very poorly—so poorly that the performance bordered on humiliating. The goal with any major championship, or any goal event you've been training for, is always to finish feeling as if you competed to the best of your ability. Being ill, I was not able to showcase my best effort and was extremely disappointed. These types of performances usually lead to either discouragement or motivation. For myself, poor showings always lead to a higher level of motivation to set new goals and prove that I could overcome the setback. The frustration and dissatisfaction of my Sydney experience propelled my performances in subsequent seasons. I set personal bests in the several events the following year including the 10,000 and won a few national championships. Setbacks are inevitable, how we respond to disappointment is the differentiator.



Alan Culpepper earned the chance to run in the Athens Olympics by winning the 2004 U.S. Olympic Trials Marathon.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A PRE-RACE PLAN

In Sydney I took a more relaxed and whimsical approach to my pre-race planning. This could be largely attributed to lack of experience and ultimately not knowing what to expect. I failed to think through all the various scenarios and how best to limit the distractions and mental drains that come with unfamiliarity. I was very close to peak form physically and mentally, but I lacked a confidence in all the various logistical details that come with an event like this. The larger the event, the more complex they are logistically, and there's an even greater need for pre-race planning. This is true for any level of athlete and those who have orchestrated a well thought-out plan always perform better. It allows them to focus more intently on the execution of their race.

THE RESULT

In Athens I did not make this mistake again. Before the event, I discussed all the various scenarios including the team training camp, sleeping arrangements, transportation, meal planning, course tour, race day logistics, etc. In the end, I was able to focus on my race, deal with fewer distractions and less uncertainty, and ultimately start my race with more confidence. This showed on race day, when I was able to complete the goal we all share of running the best we possibly can on that given day. I still look back on my 2004 Olympic marathon as one of the best races of my career.



Two-time U.S. Olympian Alan Culpepper won national titles from the 5K to the marathon. His first book, "Run Like a Champion," is available at VeloPress.com.