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# How It Feels to Finish Your Goal Race, But Not Meet Your Goal

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How does it feel to finish a major accomplishment, but not meet your goal?

Let me just come right out and say it: It sucks. (And yes, I do believe that is the preferred psychological term.)

In my case, that meant running my first marathon (which, as one friend said afterward, is a “major accomplishment”), but finishing just under 5 hours (which, as I am saying now, is not as much of a major accomplishment). In 2019, I ran a half-marathon in just under two hours. Given it was the same course, and I had a whole year of training between then and now, it seemed somewhat realistic to just double my time — a marathon in 4 hours. That’s not exactly an elite pace, or even a wildly optimistic one, but as the race got closer, I adjusted my expectations. As I stood at the starting line, I went over my goals one last time. Good: Finishing. Better: 4:30. Best: 4:15 or less.

As I went over the finish line, I was almost startled to learn I broke 5 hours.

I won’t go over the excruciating details here, but let’s just say things started poorly and got worse from there. The marathon’s start was delayed a half-hour or so because the course wasn’t ready. That, in turn, threw my body off a little bit — I used the extra time to go to the bathroom, but opted not to dip into my energy chews. Mentally, I never really recovered. During the third quarter of the race, I was aboard the struggle bus. I watched the 4:20 pacers pass me by. I figured 4:30 was still in reach, and when a pacer approached, I thought about trying to just stay even with them. But it turned out this was the 4:35 group, which demoralized me further.

But, hey, at least I finished.

In the end, I started thinking about similar experiences for other athletes. In a team sport, imagine making the championship game and then getting blown out. Or imagine training for four years for a world championship, and then getting flustered during the big game or match. Or just imagine preparing for any of the competitions any of you might participate in — from rec league basketball to a triathlon — and falling short of your goals. If you find yourself in that situation, and sooner or later we all do, here’s what to keep in mind:

## 1 LEARN FROM IT

As soon as you’re able, mentally and physically (and, perhaps, emotionally and even spiritually), write everything about your event down in a journal. Everything. What went well, what went poorly, and just plain what happened. Did you let up on Mile 14? Did you fail to execute something technical you’d trained on countless times? What was your [mental state](#) before the event? [What did you eat](#)? Drink? [How did you sleep](#)? The point is to make a record you can consult in the weeks and months ahead. After all, if you can’t measure it, you can’t improve it. And as you’ll see in tip 3, all these details will come in handy.



## 2 LET IT GO

It might seem like a contradiction with the first item, but at some point you need to develop what baseball players call a “closer mentality” — that is, the ability to fail one night, and get back out there the next night as if nothing happened.

The trick is to realize tip 1 and tip 2 are two sides of the same coin. Tip one is about reviewing your disappointing performance and glean useful information — ways you can train smarter, traps to avoid and so on. This tip is about ignoring unhelpful information. The overwhelming feeling of failure, for example. Shame, worthlessness, even depression or anxiety. (If you’re experiencing these last two, consider reaching out to a professional. After all, elite athletes have mental health coaches these days. Even if you’re not elite, you can benefit from support.)

By all means, feel your feelings — it’s only natural to feel disappointment when you’ve fallen short. But channel that emotion into a positive and constructive state-of-mind, with help from your friends, family, mentors and other supporters.

## 3 SIGN UP AGAIN

It was a strange feeling — after the disappointment faded but before my muscles stopped aching, I began looking for a new marathon to run. I couldn’t even wait another year; I wanted to run one in the fall. Those plans are on hold due to the state of the world right now, but I am trying to keep up with my training in the hopes it can happen.

After all, even after the best races, you might feel something of a letdown. All that preparation for the big day, and ... now it’s over. But especially after a bad race, it will help to have a new source of motivation, a new thing to look forward to. And getting back out there and competing again is just the thing.

To be clear: Don’t overextend yourself. If you fell short of your goals due to an injury or under-training, the last thing you want to do is compound the situation by rushing back too soon. But set a reasonable goal—maybe it’s running a shorter distance a year from now — so you have something to look forward to again. You might also set a modest interim goal, like running a certain time in a 10K, to remind yourself of your capabilities.

## 4 TRAIN BETTER

In the end, I think I failed on two fronts. The first is mental — I ultimately never got my head in the right place, never landed in the zone elite athletes are always talking about. The second is physical — as much as I trained, I don’t think I was running as many miles as I could’ve or should’ve.

So I’ve been working on both my general mental practice ([more meditating](#)) and my race-day mentality. I have been expanding my [list of mantras](#) and reconsidering my prerace [routine](#). As I build up mileage, I’ll be experimenting more with what I eat and what I drink, aiming to better replicate what I’ll actually experience on the next race day.

Then, of course, there’s the training itself. I have [set a goal of running at least 50 miles per week](#) during the month before tapering. To get there in time for an October marathon, I needed to start in March. So I did. (At least until the coronavirus messed up my schedule.) Your mileage may vary, literally, but the best thing to do, if you plan to race again, is to visualize what success looks like, and go about preparing your mind and body to go out and get it.



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### 5 REMEMBER YOUR WHY

Over the years, plenty of trainers and athletes I've spoken with have talked about finding their why — the reason they pursue a sport in the first place. There are as many whys as there are athletes, but some common themes include reconnecting with a sense of self, improving your personal health and fitness, setting an example for one's family, connecting with a community of like-minded athletes and more. So much more.

And you know what? Hardly any of them name an outcome — for example, racing to a specific time — as their why. Instead, it's more about the process and the overall joy and positivity of the experience itself. It's a helpful reminder that, while achieving your desired outcome is nice, that's not what defines you. Instead, it's the process and driving yourself to be better every day.

It can be easy, when we're in the midst of training, or when we're languishing in bed after a long, disappointing race, to lose sight of all those things. But if you take the time, you might find that the very thing that first motivated you still has the ability to inspire you onward.