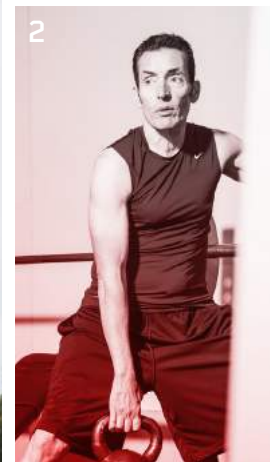


This page › The author with his coach on Skype.

Opposite › Off to a fast start at Marine Corps (1); lifting throughout his training (2); prized race medals (3); and a loyal running group (4).



HE THINKS. YOU RUN.

The author sets an ambitious goal and hires a coach to help him reach it. **How did that work out?**





A windswept rain pelts the sidewalk outside my window at 5 a.m., and I shudder at the thought of having to race 13 miles in a few hours. But the Great South Bay Half Marathon in Bay Shore, Long Island, is a critical tuneup in preparation for the Marine Corps Marathon three weeks from now.

I've set one of the most ambitious goals of my road running career for that race. Today will show whether I've got a shot.

Before I drive off into the darkness, I open an email and my mood changes almost entirely.

"Good morning, John! Just wanted to wish you a great race! Run tall, run easy! Take it a little back on the first half and then accelerate on the second half. You're trained well and you're ready for a good performance. Most important: Have fun!"

Now, who sends such a message to you before a race? Your mom? (She cares about you, but not necessarily your split times.) Your spouse or significant other? (Give them a break. They're already giving you the time to indulge in this pastime.)

No, a message like this—motivational, but also useful—could only come from one person.

A coach.

Elite runners have them. So do high school harriers and even many charity runners. But in the 30 years since my first marathon, I've been chief cook and bottle washer of my personal running enterprises, planning the workouts myself. That may explain why I never quite broke three hours. But it's worked well enough that after running the 2014 Marine Corps Marathon last October, I realized my time of 3:19:33 at age 59 and three quarters would have won the 60–64 age group.

"You have to go back and run it again next year!" a friend said when he saw these results. While I've won my age group in local road races, doing so at the sixth-largest marathon in the country would be quite an achievement.

But after 28 career marathons, what would I do differently to prepare? The pursuit of such a lofty goal seemed to demand the kind of fresh thinking that a coach could provide. Besides, like many serious runners, I already had a massage therapist, a personal trainer, and an Active Release Technique specialist when necessary. What was one more professional on my team of experts? (Not to mention one who would charge less than my accountant or attorney.) Also, let's be honest. Thirty years into the sport, I'm tired of thinking about my workouts. Let someone else do it—someone with new and better ideas.

PICKING THE PRO

I Googled "running coach" and got 25,000,000 (yes, twenty-five million) hits. The keywords "online marathon coach" brought the number down to a mere 12,200,000.

I began scrolling through the coaches advertising their services. Some were big names—Hal Higdon, Jenny Hadfield; others specialized in first-time marathoners or women. Others seemed to be offering packaged programs. I wanted someone devoted to me and willing to deal with my Type-A obsessiveness and relentless questioning.

I eventually narrowed it down to six and emailed them all.

Three have yet to respond. From the remaining three, I chose a coach in Switzerland. Why? I liked the fact that, in his prompt email response to my query, Jonas Mathys—co-owner of Quevita, a company that offers various online and personal coaching services—didn't make promises he couldn't keep.

"We're confident that we could support you to get in the best possible shape for the MCM. Unfortunately, we can't guarantee that you're going to win your age group, as we're not planning to affect your competitors' performances."

Fair enough. For \$300 for three months of coaching, I was in. Jonas told me my coach would be his business partner, Gabriel Lombriser, a 2:35 marathoner and software engineer (with a certification in exercise physiology) who has also won Swiss national championships in mountain running.

In his first contact, Gabriel didn't start barking orders or espousing his philosophy. He wanted to know about me: my workouts, my cross-training and diet, what had worked for me in the past and what hadn't; my life outside running; when I trained and who I trained with. He picked up on the fact that I wasn't one for tracking my workouts on some spreadsheet or computer program. (I still keep the old-school paper training logs.) So our communication was via email with an occasional Skype chat.

The goal was simple: Go faster than my 3:19:33 in 2014, and hope that time would be good enough to win my age group.

A FRESH LOOK

My marathon training commenced the last week of July. Right away, I saw that in his own polite fashion, Gabriel was steering me into new territory.

For starters, he got me off the track. He preferred that I do my hard workouts on a road course that mimicked the Marine Corps Marathon, in which the first five miles are hilly. He was also delighted to hear that I had a group of training partners. "This is very important," he wrote. "It is hard to do these workouts alone." One of my training partners, Ray Sullivan, was as curious as I about what this guy from Switzerland was going to prescribe. With Ray beside me, keeping track of our time and distance on his GPS, we began increasing the length and intensity of these runs on a hilly stretch of our local bike path.

Every week was an eye-opener. From a fairly conventional-sounding first workout—5 x one kilometer at 6:20/mile pace, which is my 5K pace, we began to gradually extend the length while maintaining a fairly aggressive pace. The third week we did what Gabriel termed a "crescendo run," in which we picked up the pace every 10 minutes, going from 7:50 pace to 7:35, 7:20, then 7:05. We did workouts I'd never imagined, much less attempted: a 2 x 30-minute near-marathon-pace run at 7:15 per mile with five minutes jogging between the hard intervals. Two weeks later it was a 65-minute tempo run at 7:15 pace—practically a race for me. Meanwhile, with Ray and a tag team of others helping me through, I did long runs up to 23 miles, with the final 20 minutes at race pace (7:25–7:30).

This was greater volume than I'd done in years: In the peak week of the program—about five weeks out from the marathon—I totaled 50 miles. Gabriel sent the workouts to me by email every week and followed up midweek to see how I was feeling.

How was I feeling? Stronger with each run. And less stressed, because as I learned, working with a coach makes the process simpler.

He thinks. You run.

On occasions when I had to shift the schedule, he revised the workout to fit my needs. He put his virtual foot down only once, when—in the week before the



Help Wanted

FINDING YOUR FIRST COACH IN DECADES? SEARCH CAREFULLY.

The process of looking for a coach begins with a good look in the mirror.

"Introspection is the first step," says Dena Evans, a Redwood City, California-based coach. "What kind of runner are you and what are you looking for? Do you need lots of encouragement? Do you want detail? These are all questions you need to ask in order to find the right person."

New York coach Toby Tanser recommends that serious runners create a running vitae to send to prospective coaches. Include your running, racing, health, and injury history; your past and current performances; your goals and what you're hoping a coach can do for you; and what kind of training has worked best for you in the past.

Also include useful details like the days of the week and time of day you prefer to train and whether you run with a group or solo; your cross-training and diet; and key factors about your professional and family life if they impact your ability to train. "You want to get someone who will be vested in your journey," Tanser says. "The better informed he or she is about you, the more quickly you can figure out if this is the right relationship."

Look for a coach with experience in the race distance you're focusing on. "Many coaches say they can train people from 5K to ultras, but the reality is, you can't be the best coach possible in all those events," says Andy DuBois, an Australian coach.

While much of the coach-athlete interaction may be through email or texts, don't hire someone you know only virtually; have a phone or video chat. "A coach's training expertise is crucial, but so is his or her ability to connect with you, motivate you, and hold you accountable," says Travis Macy, a coach from Colorado. Consider also how those plans, details, and advice are going to be communicated. "How does the coach write and deliver workouts?" Macy says. "Emails? Google Docs? A specialized endurance coaching platform with data tracking? You've got to be comfortable with the modality they're going to use."

And about those plans: Make sure they truly are individualized. "Coaches that write out 12-week plans aren't really selling you a customized plan," DuBois says. "Good coaches will review your training weekly and adjust accordingly, in order to tailor the program to you."

Coaches should also be accessible. Experts agree that clients should get a reply to any questions within 48 hours.

And be open to coaches with various personal running backgrounds. Says DuBois: "They don't have to be elite athletes, but if you're training for a marathon, you'd like a coach who understands what it feels like at 22 miles, when every muscle fiber in your legs is screaming to slow down, but you need to keep going to reach your goal."

► Saturday tuneup half marathon—I told him I didn’t like running easy the day before a race with a few striders, as he had prescribed, and wanted the day off.

No, he said. “Let’s try it this way!” he wrote.

So I tried it his way, taking the day off two days before the race instead.

The result: A 1:33:35 half—a good time for me—and I won my age group. I was pleased, but not nearly as much as when I read Gabriel’s email the next morning after I’d sent him the results.

“John, you rock! You are on the right track to a perfect marathon! It’s exactly the time which I expected for you! It confirms to me, that you are going to run about 3:16–3:18 at the Marine Corps Marathon!”

He’d done it again—lifted my spirits sky-high. But were my coach’s predictions accurate? We would see in three weeks.

RACE DAY

Again, I’m watching the rain fall at 5 a.m., this time on the empty, early morning streets of Washington, D.C. I am back here to run the Marine Corps Marathon, to see if I can deliver on my stated goal of winning my age group and running faster than last year.

Despite the weather, I was, as the Marines like to say, “Mission Ready.” Race bag packed; number pinned on my singlet; extra gel stashed in my shorts.

This time, the important email message from Gabriel had arrived two days earlier. It had specific instructions for the last couple of days (Friday off; 30-minute shakeout run Saturday with a few striders), as well as a detailed mile-by-mile pace plan generated on the training software he had helped design.

If I followed it, he said, I’d run 3:16—three minutes faster than last year, and hopefully fast enough to win my new age group.

Once in the starting corral, I repeated the key mile splits—5, 10, 15, 20—hoping to commit them to memory, as I looked around, casting a suspicious eye at any guy who appeared as if he might be in my age group.

It was hard to hold back at the start. By six miles, I was already nearly two minutes ahead of Gabriel’s 45:54 target for that distance. Thanks to the fitness from those long tempo runs, though, I was able to hold that 7:25 pace for nearly 19 miles of the race.

As I ran, I thought about how I had gone into the race with nary an ache or pain. Surely, this had something to do with the fact that Gabriel had encouraged to me to continue my three-times-a-week strength training regimen. (In the past, I’d typically cut that back in the weeks before the race.)

By the time we crossed the Potomac back into Virginia for the last six miles, I was slowing. As I approached mile 23, I thought of how my coach had had me run the last three miles of my long runs at race pace. Time to see what I had left. The answer: not much, but enough

to hold on to a 7:40 pace.

At last, the end in sight. I struggled up the steep hill at mile 26 (the one thing we didn’t mimic in my training runs) and crossed the finish line in 3:16:29.

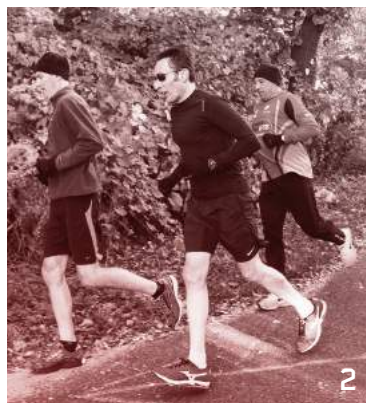
Exactly what Gabriel had predicted.

On the train back to my hotel, a text from my friend Diana. “You did it!” it read. She had attached a screenshot of the marathon results.

I had won the 60–64 age group.

“Congratulations!” wrote Gabriel when I sent him the good news. “I’m proud of you!”

I was ready to give myself a pat on the shoulder, too. Not for the race, but for deciding to hire this guy. What I needed ultimately was a smart coach with a good marathon and race-specific plan. I found him. **RT**



Coach Gabriel has to put his virtual foot down only once (1); loyal training partners do workouts alongside the author (2); a tough last six miles at Marine Corps (3).

