

Becoming the conquering hero: A young boy's journey to marathon excellence

Lisa Benz and Terry Orlick, Canada

Lisa Benz completed her Master's degree in Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa under the supervision of Terry Orlick. For her thesis, she examined the focus that elite marathon runners use during their best competitions. Through interviews with elite marathon runners, Lisa attempted to discover what these athletes focus on when they perform their best, distractions that they experience during the race, and the techniques they use to refocus. Lisa is a distance runner, and competed on the varsity teams at the University of Calgary and the University of Ottawa.

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Abstract

The following interview with Bruce Deacon was a joint interview, conducted by both Lisa Benz and Terry Orlick, as part of Lisa's thesis. Bruce is a Canadian marathon runner who represented Canada at both the Atlanta and Sydney Olympic Games (1996 and 2000, respectively), as well as four World Championships. He won a silver medal at the 2003 Pan Am Games. The interview is centered on the focus that Bruce used during his best marathon. Bruce clearly, effectively, and insightfully recalls his best marathon, powerfully detailing a race that occurred 13 years before the interview. Lessons can be drawn from Bruce's experiences – not only from his best marathon, but also from disappointing experiences during his pursuit for excellence.

Interview: Bruce Deacon, June 10, 2008

Lisa: Can you tell me how you got involved in running?

Bruce: I grew up in Ottawa at the time of the '76 Olympics. Essentially I was one of the shortest kids in my school, and I was one of the worst kids at sports. I was the guy that when we played softball in class, I'd run to the outfield because I knew no one could hit the ball that far, so I knew I couldn't drop it if no one could hit it out that far. And of course there's nothing to do out there, so I was the guy that was actually making little sandcastles because there was just really

nothing to do. I went out for a skating class, and I think I lasted one class before the instructor said 'you know, this just really isn't this kid's gig. You maybe want to practice on your own first.' And so there was a lot of that sort of stuff. I was also one of the very first classes to go through French immersion, and so they tested us extensively. And the tests were such that they started out with very easy questions and then proceeded to questions that were quite complex and usually it was timed so that you didn't finish the booklet and you didn't really know what they were asking you in the last few questions and pages. And you know what kids are like, when you've finished the test everyone wants to know how you've done. And

I was the kid who said I'd flunked, I didn't know what they were asking and I still had four pages left in the book. And frequently the other kids would say 'oh, I aced that,' so I was pretty much convinced that I was stupid. And then I also had a speech therapy problem, so I was getting speech pathology a couple times a week. I'd speak like Elmer Fudd, I couldn't say 'r' and 'w,' so I'd say, you know 'wittle wed widening hood' and that sort of thing. So the long and the short of it is, by the time the '76 Olympics came around, and later the Commonwealth Games in Edmonton, I really had very low self-esteem, but I oh so badly wanted to find some sort of a sport that I could do well at. And I can remember watching the intro to Wide World of Sports where they splash all kinds of sports all over the screen, and I knew that there had to be, if there was that big a wide world of sports, there had to be something that even scrawny little kids could do to beat the big kids. And I can remember praying and saying 'God if you give me a sport that I can do well at, then I'm going to really work hard at it, and really practice hard.'

I went away to a summer camp, this was kind of the early stages of the marathon boom, and at the summer camp there was a councillor there who had done a marathon. I had no clue what a marathon was. I knew he had this 30 mile club that he started where over the three weeks you were at camp you had to run 30 miles and you got a t-shirt. And oh I wanted that t-shirt. I figured that the fastest way to find out about this marathon was to actually go for a run with him and to pepper him with questions. I knew it had to be something special because whenever an adult said it, it was you know, 'Rob ran a *marathon*.' So you could tell by the hushed tone of respect that this was something pretty important and big to him. So I went and asked Rob, who was the councillor, 'can I go for a run with you,' and he

said, 'well, I'm actually training for a marathon, and the shortest run I'm doing is five miles.' And for some reason I said 'well I can run five miles.' In all honesty, it was about as close to a lie as you can get. The furthest I had run was across the school yard being chased by someone in a game of tag.

I figured 'well now I've got to go prove it.' And it was like a half-mile loop around the camp, and so I figured that I had to do 10 of these and if I stopped it probably wouldn't count. And somehow I dragged myself around this loop. I still don't really know how. But by the end I started to think, 'you know, I bet there's a lot of big kids that can't run this far. And maybe this is the sport that I can do well at.' And that's really what got me into it. That's when I was 11. I came back from camp and of course because Rob had run marathons, that was my big goal. So at 12 I ran a couple of marathons before I was counseled out of running that long at that age.

Terry: What a great story!

Bruce: Well it really kind of turned a corner in my life. When I think back about the experiences that I had in the sport and the opportunities that the sport has provided, it was really kind of a turning point.

Lisa: So how did things progress from there after that summer camp? How did you continue with your running after that?

Bruce: Well I went back to school and I tried out for cross country, well went out for cross country because there's no real try outs, and I would arrive at school fairly early and run around and around the school yard. Sometimes as far as, well what I said was 10 miles, I don't know if it was 10 miles, it was like 40 laps of the school yard which could have been anywhere from 10

miles to eight miles, I don't know, but it was a decent amount for a little kid to be running. I went into my first race and sure enough I didn't do very well. I wasn't last but I was far enough back that probably if I'd looked over my shoulder could have seen last. Anyway, I had been bitten by the bug by then. I started to run and joined East Ottawa Lions and trained with that group, and that got me really kind of hooked into running.

Lisa: So then you just progressed with it throughout the rest of high school?

Bruce: Yeah, pretty much. One of the big stars of the day was Bill Rodgers. And Bill Rodgers to me was what Bobby Orr was to a lot of my peers. I actually wrote to Bill when I was 12 and said that I was running marathons. And he was kind enough to write back to say, 'well you probably shouldn't be running marathons while you're 12 years old, run track.' And I was disappointed to hear this, nevertheless I took his advice and started running track and started doing reasonably well at high school track and progressed through track and field and went off to university and ran a real lacklustre university career at the University of Western Ontario. When I moved out here [Vancouver] to do my teacher's training, that's when things started to really take off and I started to make some national teams.

Lisa: What kind of distances were those?

Bruce: My first national team was for 10,000 metres. So it was kind of the longer track distances. I was okay in high school in cross country, but my running style wasn't exactly suited towards running cross country. So it was mainly the longer track races and then I started to dabble a bit back in the marathon and that's where things started to go well.

Lisa: And so when did you run that first marathon (as an adult)?

Bruce: I think I was 24.

Terry: So that was almost 12 years later, after your first one.

Bruce: Yeah, yeah it was.

Lisa: And how did that first marathon go, when you were 24?

Bruce: It went reasonably well. I ran 2:19. I think I was 10th or something like that in Canada. And it was okay. The real breakthrough was the following year when I went from 2:19 to 2:15 and that's when it was like 'okay, well I could make a go of this.'

Lisa: And so when you ran the 2:15 was that your second marathon?

Bruce: Yes, that would have been my second one (as an adult).

Terry: What did you learn from the first one that you applied to the second?

Bruce: I think one of the things was that my 10k time really dropped significantly. I went from running 29:25 for 10k down to running 28:46 and that qualified me for the World University Games. So I went away for the World University Games and I fell in love with the Games and I just became that much more determined to run, to get back to a multi-sport Games, some sort of a Games. And I realized that it probably wasn't going to be 10,000 metres, and that if I was going to do the marathon I was really going to have to up my mileage and put the hammer down and go for it. And so I think really what I learned was that if I was going to compete at the marathon at a higher level, at a national team level, that I was going to

have to work harder than what I was working.

Terry: So did your training change after that?

Bruce: Yeah, I strung together some pretty good mileage after that. Not excessive, but 100 mile weeks. And I think as much as anything my mental approach changed. I think at that point in time I started to think of myself more as a marathoner and I was seeing that the marathon was going to be where my priorities would be in terms of training and racing.

Terry: Do you think that you were more committed to this journey now then you ever were before then?

Bruce: It's hard to determine that because I was pretty determined at a pretty young age. I think that what I would say is that I started to believe that my dreams could actually come true.

Terry: I was going to ask you 'when did you start to believe that your dreams could actually come true?' So was it around that time that you thought 'yeah, I could really do something here'?

Bruce: Yeah, when I look back at my university career, I was a choker, I really choked in big races. And with the marathon, there's not much room for that because you can only run like two or three a year, so if you're going to choke as soon as you get to a big race, well, good luck, you're only running local races when nobody's there. I think one of the big epiphanies for me was that the training group I had was essentially like a national team training group. I was working with the Kajaks under Marek Jedrzejek and Doug Clement and it was a fantastic training group. And what I was

able to do was to observe how Canadian record holders and Olympians and Commonwealth Games medalists approached their sport, and it just really kind of opened up my eyes that you don't have to under-perform at a big race. It just got me thinking more along the lines of 'I'm a professional.' Instead of thinking 'oh, I hope I have a good race,' it was 'well why wouldn't I have a good race?' At the same time I was entering into the profession of teaching and so I saw the way that professionals think. My dad was a dentist and I started thinking along the lines 'well my dad doesn't wake up in the morning and say 'gee, I hope I don't drill through somebody's cheek.' He's a professional, he expects certain things of himself, he expects that he can perform on the day due to the training and the education that he's had. And so why would it be any different for me? Because I've done the work, why can't I perform on the day? And it just really changed the way that I approached things from a mental perspective. I really think that a lot of the change at that point in time wasn't necessarily that I dramatically changed my training or that sort of thing, I think a lot of it was that I got myself into a different place mentally where I actually started to believe that I could do something and that I could reach levels of being on an Olympic team.

Terry: So reflecting back now, what do you think empowered you or enabled you to make that change? Was it training with those people and watching how they approached things or that combined with making you think, I can really do this? How did that shift take place for you?

Bruce: Yeah I think that training with those guys really helped a lot.

Terry: What did you see? Was it something that they were doing, or just the way that they walked out there? What was it?

Bruce: It was their approach I think, Terry I can remember I was doing a fair bit of work with a steeplechaser by the name of Graeme Fell and it was to see the way that he approached the sport, it was to see the way that Paul Williams started to approach the sport, and Len also. It was to see these guys, that they were very normal people, they weren't immortal as I had made them out to be, they were just normal people. They had the same mental skills that I had, they might have had more talent in certain areas but it was just gradually starting to think that I can race well when I need to race well. And it was a realization that if I want to race well then I have to train hard and I have to devote myself to this and I had to take some risks. I was teaching full time in '92 and I was hoping to make the Olympic team in Barcelona, and I just wasn't far enough along, really, and you had to run two standards. I ran out of time, I was too young. And that made me think, 'well, I missed it this time but I really want to make the next one.' And so that started to get me thinking 'okay, what do I have to do?' And in '92 I went away in the summer time to England and I trained with a guy by the name of Bud Baldaro. He was the national marathon coach in the UK, and I think if any one person really helped to bring me along in my thinking, in my training, in my approach to myself, if any one coach really added that and helped develop that it would have been Bud. He has a wonderful way of making you believe in yourself and I think that really helped out a lot, and also connected me with the top British coaches and top British runners from the '70s and '80s and I just interviewed them. How they train, and how did you approach the sport, and I took copious notes. And it was really like going away to

marathon school for a summer. It was amazing. It was a great opportunity that really got me thinking beyond where I was.

Terry: That was a great move. Can you comment any on any more details on what Bud did, like what was special about him projecting belief or helping you believe? Did he make comments or what kinds of things did he do?

Bruce: Well one of the big things that he did was, he took it away from things being one season at a time. I think we're pretty good as athletes and coaches at making yearly plans. But we're not necessarily great at making multi-year plans. And so he just kind of demystified things. He was kind of like 'well if you want to make Atlanta then you should do this the year before, do well at World Championships. And the year before that you should be on the Commonwealth Games team, which was in Victoria. So what are you going to need to do to do that? What are you going to have to race?' And so we just kind of broke it down, we made a plan. And that I think really helped. It helped from an organizational perspective because then I knew how to organize my training and my racing. But it also helped because as he's doing this, he was speaking not as 'well, this might work, and you might be able to do this if you do this,' it was a matter of fact type thing. You have the talent to do this. Why wouldn't you be able to pull this off? And it was that sort of thing that really helped me out a lot and really got me thinking in the direction that 'I can pull this off.'

And I went back [to England] in 1994 to run the London Marathon, and it was just the same kind of thing, 'Bruce you're going to do this. You're going to have a great race.' And it was just very, very positive thinking and very positive outlook to things. It was

speaking as if this was going to happen and not as if this could happen. And you start to absorb this over the space of a week or two and you start to think the same things. ‘Well why can’t I do this,’ as opposed to thinking, like I would have in university ‘oh I hope I have a good race,’ or more likely ‘I hope I don’t have a bad race.’ I put so much energy into thinking ‘gee I hope I don’t have a bad race,’ and now it was just a case of ‘well I’m going to have a good race.’ And I think that’s really one of the things that he was able to do, was to shift my paradigm away from worrying about having a bad run towards having a good run. And it complimented so much of what was already starting to occur just from training with these faster guys. It wasn’t a one-off thing, it was just set in so nicely with the other things that I was starting to think anyways. And I actually went and trained with him in 1995 prior to the World Championships. I’d qualified for the Worlds, and I knew if I came top 20 that was probably the best way to qualify for the Olympics. Bud and I kind of mapped out a schedule as to what would happen. And I went away on holidays with him and his family, out to the Cornish Coast and just trained there. It was just great because it was like having one-on-one coaching for two or three weeks. With somebody who not only has the technical expertise, which no doubt he has, but I wouldn’t say that’s the strongest thing that Bud has going for him. I would say that the thing that Bud has going for him more than anything is the psychological end of things, just to be able to speak confidence into an athlete and to get you thinking that you could go through a wall. And I’ve talked to other athletes who have worked with him and it wasn’t just me. That’s one of the greatest things about Bud’s coaching skills is that he is just so good at making people so confident.

Terry: So then it was just a question of executing your race and you’re going to be there. Is that right?

Bruce: Exactly. We planned out a plan and the plan was to start conservatively and just work through the field. And it worked to a T. So with 100 metres to go I was in 10th whereas I had been seeded 70th. And I ended up getting 11th, I got out-kicked by a US guy but never-the-less it was that huge breakthrough that showed that I could run well at a championships, that essentially set me up to be qualified for the Olympics. There were still some more hoops to jump through, but what that did for my confidence was just enormous.

Lisa: Can you tell me a bit about why you run?

Bruce: I just really love it. There are certain things that I love about the sport. I live close to a big forest and I love going running in the woods. And I love the feel of just getting out and being active and having some alone time. I think the other side of it is that I like the feeling of working really hard. If it was just a case of just going and jogging, I think that would be fine for a while, but I really do like the idea of pushing myself and seeing what I’ve got in myself on the day. I think also, over time, it has become part of my identity. And so I think some of what I like about the sport is that it is part of who I am. And competing is part of who I am. The other thing is that it’s a competitive outlet. When you think about it, there are not that many places in the real world where you can be competitive and not be thought of as a jerk. Whereas when you’re an athlete and you’re competing in a race, it’s okay to try to out-kick somebody in the last 100 or 200 metres. It’s okay to drop a surge in the middle to try to break somebody. Aggression is not thought of as negative. It’s thought of as

just being a good competitor, being tough. Whereas if you try to translate that into the real world, the non-athletic world, we're taught to be cooperative, we're taught to be kind, to be gentle. Especially as Canadians, aggressiveness isn't really thought of in a positive way, or it is if it's constrained and it's limited. So it gives me an outlet to be competitive where I'm not thought of as less of a person but I'm thought of as more of a person. I don't know if that makes a lot of sense.

Terry: Yeah, I think it makes a lot of sense. You commented about running in the woods, or through forest trails near where you live. Where is your mind on those kinds of runs? Are you sometimes just completely free, just running, or are you kind of in and out? What are you connected to in those runs generally?

Bruce: Well I guess it depends. Some of it will depend on how hard I'm running. It really varies, Terry. Sometimes this is my time to work through problems.

Terry: Yeah, you just kind of let them work their way out, right?

Bruce: Exactly. Other times, this is my time where it's a very spiritual time, it's almost like a devotional time. When I was younger and more driven by competing, a lot of the time was spent just dreaming about races. You know, running through races.

Terry: So would you imagine people next to you or finishing strong, or that kind of thing?

Bruce: Absolutely. It was my visualization time really. But not in the typical, like lie in the middle of the floor on your back and imagine waves are breaking over you, that sort of thing. It was just going out and run-

ning hundreds of races in my mind where I see myself doing well, either winning or running a time.

Terry: Did those things surface naturally, or on the way out think 'I'm going to be thinking about these things?'

Bruce: No they were very natural. I think part of it was being driven towards a single race. The unique thing about the marathon is that unlike a 1500m race where you have 10, 12 races in a season, with a marathon you've got two or three in a year. So you really have to be mentally ready for those, you really focus on those races, that's why it's so tiring and so difficult to hold a marathon build-up for much more than 12 weeks. It's not necessarily that the training is so intense, it's the focus is so intense. So it's just the focus and it's all or nothing. It's one race, on the line. And so to be able to run through that race in a number of different ways and times, it just kind of came naturally because of the focus of the whole thing.

I just think that the whole training and racing season for a marathon is significantly different than for other events. If you are running 10k's and you have a bad weekend and you're sick, well that's okay, you don't race because there's another race in another two weeks or something like that. And as a result there's a little less pressure to have it all together on the one day. Because there are multiple days, you judge your season on two or three months of training, and racing really. Whereas with the marathon, you judge yourself, your season, based on the one day that you have. And as a result there's a lot of pressure.

Terry: So there is added pressure in the lead up time to the race because those races are so important, there are so few of them?

Bruce: Exactly.

Lisa: You have talked a bit about focus, can you just describe what focus means to you in terms of your running?

Bruce: Yeah, it's waking up and knowing that 'okay, one of the most important things that I have to do today, if not the most important thing I have to do today is train. Because I now have nine and a half weeks left until the marathon.' And the next day I have a little less than nine and a half weeks left. Three days later, I have nine weeks. And it's the focus of knowing 'okay, I have to recover from yesterday's workout because I have to go out and bury myself again in another two days. And so I have to work as hard as I can today but yet not work so hard that I won't recover. It's every little time that you've got a twinge or a niggle or something like that, you're in to a physio or a chiropractor or somebody like that because you just have to stay ahead of everything. If you're injured or lose a week to injury, then how will you get caught up? It's always having the marathon in front of you.

Lisa: Okay, and then what about being focused while you're running? What's that like for you?

Bruce: I'll give you an example. We kind of talked about some of the dissociative thinking, running through the woods type thing. That's really not all that focused because there's a lot of free mental time there, which is one of the things that I really like about the sport. But if I'm running hard, then I can't do that. When I get to a certain pace or a certain level of effort then I'm just not able to put thoughts together that way. So then it becomes more focused and I'm thinking more about what my body is doing, I'm scanning my body, I'm pushing my body that much harder, I'm playing little mental

tricks to try to keep myself from backing off. I'm monitoring how I'm feeling, whether I'm tight or I'm loose. If I'm in a race, I'm watching where other people are and trying to relax in behind them. It's very, very, very focused and it's mentally taxing.

Terry: You mentioned the mental tricks to not back off, can you share some of the things that you did or do?

Bruce: Yeah, a lot of it is self-coaching.

Terry: So what kind of thoughts, or what would you be thinking, saying or hearing?

Bruce: I hear Bud's voice a lot.

Terry: Okay, do you mean in terms of a believing type of voice, or in terms of what you should be focused on at that point in the race?

Bruce: It's like Bud is standing on the side of the road cheering me on type thing. English accent and all. A lot of it is just digging down and pulling inspiration from anything you can think of at the time or anything that comes to mind. One of the ways I like to run, in the later parts of the race, is to be the hunter. So I'll be trying to focus on the guy ahead of me and how I can get up, pull them in and try to relax. In the latter stages of the marathon your mind starts to do some very strange things with distance. For instance, a mile will go by very quickly in the first 10 miles. Whereas a mile will go by very slowly from 20 miles on. And it's not necessarily that you're running slower, it's just that your perception of time and distance is askew. So it's trying to get through those types of mental things or perceptions of time and distance. In some cases you're picking landmarks and you're running as hard as you can to the landmarks. Most of it is just a lot of really hard self coaching and self talk.

So ‘come on Bruce, come on, you can do this, come on, come on, be tough, stay with this guy, stay with this guy.’ You know, ‘if you can hold with this guy for another mile you can break him.’ That sort of thing, just a lot of self talk, a lot of self coaching as I’m running along.

Terry: When you’re saying ‘come on hold it, hold it,’ or ‘you can catch this guy,’ do you say that a few times and then reconnect with your pace or movement or picking it up? Is it kind of a back and forth kind of thing?

Bruce: Absolutely. It’s not a constant me yakking away in my head. A lot of it is just monitoring where I’m at and just getting lost in the flow of things.

Lisa: What would you say was your best marathon?

Bruce: I definitely think the Gothenburg one is the very best that I’ve ever run.

Lisa: When was that?

Bruce: That was in ’95.

Lisa: Was that the ’95 World Championships?

Bruce: That’s right.

Lisa: Okay, what I want you to do is just take us through that marathon, the days leading up to it, the night before, the morning of, and then the various parts of the race, what you were focused on and what you were thinking about. So can you just start with the couple days before - what were you doing then, focusing on?

Bruce: Actually it was very interesting because I qualified in Toronto, I ran 2:17 in

Toronto, which was off my best by about four minutes. And I was asked by the head coach to write a letter saying how I was going to come top 16. And I was teaching full time plus at that point in time, I was teacher-principal of an independent school, so I was working crazy hours. So part of my plan was, it was going to be summer so I wouldn’t have to work that hard, and the other part of the plan was that I was going to go and stay with Bud for a while. And so I went over. When I look back on it and I tell people that I was forced to write this letter, a lot of people are quite surprised that I was required to do that. But when I look back on it, I think it was the greatest thing going, because it set a standard of expectations for me, and the expectations were that you’re not going just to have fun, you’re going there because we expect you to come top 16 in the world. And to be quite honest with you, that’s what I wanted to do anyway, so it wasn’t like ‘gulp, I’ll never be able to do it,’ it was like ‘well, this is exactly what I’m trying to train for,’ so if anything it was a confirmation of ‘well, hey, they expect this of me and I expect this of me, so let’s just go and make it happen.’ I went away to England and I trained with Bud for probably five weeks before the race. And when I went over I was very fit. I had just won the national 10,000 metre championships and I was ready to go. And this is when I spent some time with him down on the Cornish Coast and it was just such an inspiring place to train and it was just so enjoyable to train with Bud for that kind of time. And then to just have some down time with him. I trained two times a day and it was a little surf village, so then we’d go body surfing during the day. So it was fun, it was just a really enjoyable time. I didn’t feel like I was living a monastic life, I felt like I was living a very outdoor and vigorous life. It was aligned with the kind of person I wanted to be, and it was focused, yet it wasn’t focused

in an anal type way. I can remember sitting up on this big bluff, and Bud an English teacher by profession was reading English poetry to me and some other athletes. Really rich memories of just having a good time. When we returned to Birmingham, which is where his home is, we had probably a week and a half left before the race. We started looking at what the weather was like in Sweden where the race was going to be held. And it was an unusually warm summer. So it was at that point in time that I realized that I've got to start doing some heat training because although it was warm, I wanted this to be in my favour. And I wanted to be able to race really well when other guys were going to get psyched out by that. So I started training in a sauna and I would run on the spot in the sauna to get acclimatized to the heat. And saunas are way hotter than anything that you're going to get outside of the sauna. So it was really good, it was good in the sense that it physiologically helped me to acclimatize, but I am a firm believer that it just made me really tough to the heat. So when it came time to being a warm day, and it wasn't excessively hot during the day, but certainly hotter than what you'd want for a marathon, it was like 25°C (77°F) - 26°C (79°F) but I was ready for that, and I didn't think that it affected me at all.

I got into the village a few days before the race, probably five or six days before the race and it was just a really positive experience for me. I can remember rooming with two guys that I had trained with, and we were all newbies at this level of competition. And one of the guys was a steeplechaser, and I think he came last or pretty close to last in his heat. I can remember him coming back and saying 'you know, we're just not ready to compete at this level. We're just not at this level.' And when I reflect on it, it was a time when I very easily could have said

'yeah, you're right, oh boy I hope I don't have a bad race.' But my reaction was 'well maybe you're not, but I am.' Because I had just been so conditioned over the preceding weeks that this was going to be a positive experience and that I was ready, and that if I just stuck to my race plan that things were going to go really well.

I can remember late at night going out into this big field off of the athletes' village and thinking things through and thinking about what I wanted to do and how I wanted to race. And there was one other Canadian marathoner who was running and that was Peter Maher. And Peter got into the village a little later than I did, and he'd run the kind of race that I wanted to run which was going out slow and picking people off. So I really tried to get as much advice from him as possible. And he was doing wacky things like shaving his head for the heat, a little too much for this cat. But anyway, I figured 'what I'll do is I'll key off of Peter' and I think that's what I try to do in a marathon. Because there's a fair amount of pressure of not wanting to go out too fast, but yet wanting to go out at a pace where you feel like you're still connected with the race. I try to find somebody that I can run with, kind of key off of for the first few miles, just to take the mental pressure off of myself. So I figured 'well, I'll key off of Peter because Peter has done this before and this is the kind of race he's going to run again.' And so I went out, and I've got actually a picture of Peter and I leaving the stadium, and I think that we were the third or fourth last people leaving the stadium. So we were way back. At two kilometres I looked behind myself and I think I was last. And it looked like Peter was not having a great race. So it was kind of one of those things, 'well do I stay with Peter or do I venture off and just try and pick things up?' At that point in time the choice was pretty simple. If I stayed with

Peter, I was hitching my wagon to a star that really wasn't going to go very far. So I really ventured off and I started to gradually pick off people and work my way through the field, probably about 100 runners, so I was probably about 98th or 99th. I just started to gradually pick my way through the field.

When I was in England I was really getting absorbed in the English culture and really having good conversations with Bud and other people about a whole variety of things, from history to art to literature. I'm a huge Churchill fan and so I adopted the coaching line of 'this is your finest hour' which is part of Churchill's speech to encourage the British people as they are getting bombed by the Germans during the Battle of Britain. So I really adopted that line. And before I left home I started going out with a woman who would later become my wife, Rosemary, so I was missing Rosemary and because I was in Sweden I took the Viking line of return, I wanted to return the conquering hero. A Viking raid. So I used these throughout the race as encouragement and just to calm myself down as much as anything. Not to get too carried away in the early parts of the race. And also just to build up the excitement.

When it comes to being in the flow, I think I was really in the flow that day. I was having fun. I was looking around myself and it really was my finest hour because I was feeling like I had trained and worked so hard, and dreamed so much of being in this kind of a race. **And there was no other place in the world that I would have rather been.** I was having so much fun. Just running. Just competing. And seeing all the different colours of the uniforms. Getting to the water stops and seeing the elite water bottles from different countries and grabbing mine and getting back into the pace and keying off some guys and then they'd start

to slow a bit and then I'd go catch the next group and work my way through. And it was a three lap race so when we looked at the course, everything was seen through a positive lens.

It was a three lap race and it went right by the athletes' village. So that means that as the race goes on and people started to feel tired, it was going to be this constant pull to drop out because they know that they can just scoot over to the athletes' village and gather their thoughts and console themselves. It was a hot day and so I knew that this was going to play to my advantage and I knew that the three laps was going to play to my advantage because I knew that when I went by the athletes' village I wasn't going to get pulled away by that but that I was going to benefit from other guys feeling that this was something that they would be tempted to do. And so I was running these laps and moving up through the field. I think the first real time that I had any idea where I was, was at 20k or something like that, and somebody yelled out 'you're in 30th place.' So I had already passed like 60 people or so. And at 25k I think I was in 23rd. And then I was really getting excited. This was my finest hour, and then I started to recognize the people that I was passing. I think that that really helped me to feel a real rush that I'm racing in the big leagues now, this isn't just a bunch of guys with fancy uniforms on, these are the guys that I've seen on the covers of running magazines. And then I broke into the top 20 and I realized 'hey look, if I can hold this, now I'm on the Olympic team, or well on my way to being on the Olympic team.' I kept pulling along and passing people. I can remember looking up the road and seeing guys that I recognized, Steve Monneghetti from Australia, I could see him running along and thinking to myself 'that's Steve! Holy crow, I'm not that far off of where Steve is!' And all the time I keep us-

ing the lines ‘this is your finest hour’ and ‘return the conquering hero’ and a lot of self talk. It was really fun because I passed these guys that I knew. And part of me wanted to stop to ask for their autograph. Because I really felt like I was in another world. As I was going along and as I was competing it was like ‘no, you’re competing and you deserve to be here.’ The race grew as I ran it so that my confidence was getting larger and larger. I felt like I deserved to be there and that I had what it took to actually make it and be very competitive in this.

I got into ninth and I was racing with the guy who had won the New York marathon the year before. Part of it was like I just couldn’t believe it, it was like a dream that I was racing against, going head-to-head with a guy that I had only read about in results and seen on magazine covers. It was almost surreal. And I was in such a flow, I just couldn’t feel like I could get myself tired. It was only really the last two k that I really started to feel like ‘okay, now I’m tired.’ Actually Espinosa pulled away from me and I’m no longer in ninth, now I’m in 10th and I can remember entering into the stadium and knowing that ‘I’m in 10th place right now.’ And I looked over my shoulder with about 70 metres to go and there was Steve Plascencia from the United States and he was closing down on me and he was like a 27:50 10k guy and ‘gulp, what am I going to do?’ It was like I heard every single high school coach that I’d ever had say ‘pump your arms! Pump your arms!’ And I later saw it on television, it was like I was doing the front crawl, I was so tired and so uncoordinated at that point. My arms were going wide and Steve just blew by me and there was nothing [laughing], nothing short of hitting him that I could have done. I knew that wasn’t kosher, so I ended up in 11th and I was just so overjoyed with that. I just

couldn’t, couldn’t believe it. I was just so completely absorbed in that experience.

To show you how absorbed I was in it, the President of Athletics Canada, I don’t know where they were sitting in the stands, they called down to the track side. I was talking with one of the coaches and they called down to congratulate me. Somebody passed me the phone and, and said ‘it’s the President!’ The first thought that entered through my mind was ‘well that’s awfully nice. I wonder what George Bush wants to say to me!’ [laughs]. It was almost like ‘aw darn, it’s only Alex Gardner,’ [laughing]. I was just so overjoyed with the whole thing and so caught in the moment and I think that was one of the things that typified the whole race experience. I was so caught in the moment, there was nothing else in the world that was going on besides from the race I was running. There were no distractions, there were no thoughts about ‘I wonder how so-and-so is doing,’ or ‘oh gee, look at the Volvo plant we just ran by.’ It was so focused. I guess there were some thoughts, but I was just so caught up in the race and the fun of it, it was hard but it was just so much fun.

Terry: Awesome description of that race!

Lisa: Yeah, that was really good!

Lisa: You did kind of mention that things got difficult with two kilometres left. Can you tell me what you were doing to actually deal with that?

Bruce: Oh gee. Hmm. [Long pause] Just a lot of self coaching, this is your finest hour, coming back to those key phrases. They’re kind of humorous now, but at the time I had accepted those as my as my key phrases during the race.

Lisa: What focus do you feel allows you to perform your best while you're running?

Bruce: I think it's the feeling that things are working out, that sense of momentum, a sense of things operating according to plan, or a feeling that I've been able to adapt to the circumstances that I haven't anticipated. And reshape the plan, and now things are working according to plan. I guess you could say it's a feeling of control. You feel like you're in control of what's happening. Then it's fun, it's what you trained for. You're a performer, you're like an actor on a stage delivering the lines that you've rehearsed over and over and over and gauging the audience's response, a positive response.

Terry: Is the feeling of being in control and moving forward you described, related to you just being in each moment as it presents itself?

I think so. I am in the moment. I'm not running the next mile, I'm running this mile. And I know that some people break things down into various different chunks and I've kind of done that before too, but I really think that a lot of it is just being in the moment and just being able to race. When I'm having a fantastic race I'm not caught up in running to the next mile marker I'm just running where I'm running. And the mile markers seem to be flowing past me, as opposed to me working to get to the next one.

Terry: Did you feel at the end of the race that you gave everything that you could?

Absolutely. The last 100m I was spent. I had given absolutely everything that I could.

Terry: How did that feel?

Bruce: Oh, it felt great. It just felt great. It felt like I was in a position where I timed it

perfectly. I mean physiologists will say that one of the best ways of racing is even splits and I was pretty much dead-on even splits. It just worked out to be the ideal race. And I had done so much better than anybody had ever really expected me to do.

Lisa: So how would you compare your focus with that race in '95 where you were feeling great with a race that was disappointing?

Bruce: I think that often in a race that's disappointing, I just never really get that momentum behind me. I ran the 2000 Olympics in Sydney and I just never got the momentum behind me. We started into the wind, it was a ferocious, windy day, and 30 to 50 metres into the race I got tripped and did a spread eagle on the ground. I picked myself up and tried to console myself a bit, 'this is going to make a really interesting story once I've done really well. I'll be able to point back and tell kids about overcoming adversity and picking yourself up off the ground'. I had those few fleeting seconds where I thought that this is going to work out okay. And a few hundred metres down the road, the athlete that I'm running behind jumps out of the way and sure enough there's a barricade. So I slip to the side and then we're running down the road a little while later and the guy in front of me jumps because the person in front of him had fallen. And I almost fell again. This happened about two or three times and then I'm running along and I look up and there's this big sign that says 'one kilometre.' And I'm thinking, 'oh crap, this is not how I envisioned the Olympics.' And from there right on through to the finish it was like I never felt like I had a sense of momentum. It was always like one 'oh crap' moment followed by another. So I never really got into the case where 'things are good, now it's really going according to plan.' So that

was an example where the difference in the focus is that I'm not focused, I'm not necessarily lost in the moment and feeling a sense of momentum. I'm feeling the sense that the wheels are falling off the wagon, that I'm having a hard time leaving behind the incidence on the last kilometre or mile, that sort of thing.

Terry: So did it spread out after that? Was there room to run after that?

Bruce: Yeah there was and I got to about 15 kilometres and then the pace quickened and I started to cramp. I lost contact with the group of guys that I was really focusing on running with. It just kind of went from bad to worse and it turned out to be a pretty miserable day. And it was right down to the things where you start to put together images while you're running, where it's like 'oh man this is so lousy, even this is going wrong.' So running downtown we're going between buildings and the wind is so strong that it whistles down this tunnel and is blowing the bottles off the tables. And instead of thinking positively, I'm thinking, 'holy jumping. Could it get any worse than this?' We go underneath this overpass and the crowds are really thick and it's echoing in there, and instead of thinking 'wow, this is really energizing,' I'm thinking 'oh this is so deafening, can't they just shut up for a while.' So it was just one thing after another.

Terry: So it just sort of spiralled down then?

Bruce - It just went completely out of control. I was never able to gain control back. I think it's reasonable that things aren't always going to go your way. So you practice your mental techniques and strategies so that when things aren't going your way you can still gather control and refocus and deal with it. But I was never

able to pull myself together for those strategies to work.

Terry: Do you think you learned anything from that race that helped you in other races? Or did you never experience that kind of multiple obstacle situation again?

Bruce: [Pause] My natural inclination is to say 'no,' I didn't learn what I probably could have learned if I'd had a proper debrief from that. But when I look back on it, I start to think 'well okay, I have had other races since then where things started out in a way where there was certainly a possibility that I could have taken a really negative view of things. For instance, I got to Pan Am Games and I missed my ride to the start through miscommunication. So I ended up taking a cab and got there like really late before the start. And we couldn't get into the stadium and I had a tussle with this armed guard who was about to take the safety off his machine gun. I finally arrived at the start and it's like 10 minutes before the start and I don't have any time to warm up. And the race goes out way quicker than I ever thought it would and before long I'm pretty much in last and it's going to be a really hot day and there I am running all by myself. I had every reason not to be positive because I could have very easily said, 'oh, this is just another Sydney.' But I didn't go down that way and I was able to stay positive. So I don't know if that's just kind of mental skills that I kind of absorbed from Sydney or if it was just a different type of day.

Terry: So let's say that we can do time travel and you can run that Sydney Olympic race over again, what do you think could have made a difference? I know you can't change that race, but maybe other people can learn from that one, or from what your wisdom tells you now. Looking back in

from the outside, maybe you could have done this or this or this.

Bruce: I think that in light of the first three close calls in the first kilometre and the fall, I think I handled those pretty well mentally. I think where I kind of lost it was when I looked up and saw one kilometre and thought ‘holy crap. I’ve got 41 more of these.’

Terry: It probably felt like you went about 30 k right?

Bruce: That’s exactly it, ‘I can’t believe it’s only one kilometre.’ So I think I should have had a couple of mental tricks up my sleeve to really gather myself together if things went that badly. I’d imagined things being tough because you have to, but I’d never really imagined that kind of a crisis. Falling

that early in the race or having those kinds of things that would keep me from getting into a rhythm early. I think that I should have had a way to re-gather myself. It did spiral from there because I remember going over the Sydney bridge and not even feeling like I was getting into a flow and having a hard time settling into the pack. I think I needed to have a couple of strategies worked out in advance, ‘okay, if you’re not feeling like you’re in the flow, you’re going to do A, B, C, and D.’

Terry: Thank you Bruce for sharing some great insights about the up and downs of the journey.

Lisa: And I really appreciate it.