

Training may sometimes have to be gruelling but it should always be fun

Published 08/08/17 by [Blake Richardson](#)

Marion Clignet

SILVER BULLET: Marion Clignet speeds her way to the silver medal in the individual pursuit at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney.

There is potentially a high price to pay in pursuit of athletic development. Coaches focused on helping their athletes fulfill their dreams of becoming future Olympians risk the element of fun falling between the cracks. The issue of how far coaches should push participants in the quest for incremental performance gain is, according to two-time Olympic individual pursuit medalist and former professional cycling coach [Marion Clignet](#), a question of balance and fine lines.

- Pushing your body to the limit comes with the territory in endurance sports, with hard graft a prerequisite to improving performance.
- Enjoyment too is directly linked to achieving optimal performance so training should be fun and not impact negatively on the sporting experience.
- A coach must be aware of each person's limits, and how far they are comfortable stepping out of their comfort zone.
- Many coaches have an aversion to the rallying cry 'no pain, no gain' because, if taken literally, it can have damaging repercussions.
- The ethical considerations of pushing children too far, too quickly, too young have come into sharp focus in recent times with media exposés of Premier League football academies.

Have you ever witnessed uncompromising coaching methods that would not have looked out of place in a military academy, with participants made to sweat like they were in selection training for the Parachute Regiment?

Did you tut-tut and shake your head in disbelief and despair, as early or mid-teens were taken to the verge of hitting the wall, all in the interests of athletic development – certainly not in the interests of player welfare?

I bet you wished you could have treated the sergeant major, sorry coach, like the teenagers they rode roughshod over, issuing them with an hour's detention and giving them 100 lines: 'This is not a crack commando unit, I will not be cruel to my athletes.'

And yet... and yet!

Scroll on a few years, where the coach is working with a group of talented athletes for whom national prestige surely beckons.

Those who have risen through the ranks will be wise to the fact they must go outside their comfort zone if they are to continue on their upward trajectory. How far outside will depend on a number of factors, not least their chosen sport.

Certainly every endurance athlete will understand the basic biological necessity of pushing their body during exercise. That gruelling sessions come with the territory if they are to increase the volume of red blood cells in their bloodstream to boost their circulatory system's oxygen-carrying capacity.

Is pushing those type of athletes to their limits to help them achieve their goals justifiable? How do you establish the line between reasonable and unreasonable?

I pose these questions to ConnectCoaches member Marion Clignet – the former Directeur Sportif for the New Zealand national team, junior boys, espoirs and women and coach of the Tour de France Bouygues Telecom professional men's team (now Direct Énergie).

The coming of age

As with most issues that affect personal wellbeing, it boils down to balance and fine margins, says Marion.

'It is about feeling comfortable outside of your comfort zone. And it depends on the athlete's limits as to how much they can step out of their comfort zone. If you take them outside of that as a coach, they are always going to suffer a little bit. As they progress, that suffering will get easier, until they move up to the next level.'

Drelling athletes whose main motivation is to hang out with their friends to the point of exhaustion is clearly inappropriate (that should go without saying!), while the age of the performer is also significant.

'Granted, if you are a coach working with [kids](#), as a young age it has to be a game, it has to be fun. Then, after a certain age, it becomes more business,' adds ConnectCoaches member Marion – who was snubbed by the United States Cycling Federation after being diagnosed with epilepsy aged 22 and went on to ride internationally for France, winning multiple world titles and two Olympic silver medals.

'When you get into the junior development ranks in cycling for example – that's 16 for [boys and girls](#) – that is when the international action really starts and the road to progression gets serious.

'And then there is another step when you are around 18. So there are two steps crucial to your development.'

Fun should be par for the course

But even then, at this business end, athletes should not lose sight of the fun factor.

Before Rory McIlroy won the British Open at Hoylake in 2014, he was on a dismal run of form. He was grinding himself into the dust physically and mentally, forgoing opportunities for recovery and regeneration by sticking rigidly to a hectic globe-trotting schedule. The fun had evaporated from playing golf because of physical and [mental](#) overload.

'Golf was always fun to me,' said McIlroy. 'It was a joy to play and to get out on the golf course. But at that point it felt like a grind and I just wasn't enjoying it as much as I should have been. I had to learn to enjoy the challenge of trying to get better. And leading up to the Open at Hoylake that is exactly what I did.'

The rest, as they say, is history.

Marion – a Level 3-qualified coach – has a similar story to tell of how enjoyment is directly linked to optimal performance. She has a friend who lives in Brittany, whose 14-year-old son has already won 18 cycling races this year.

'Now he has tasted all these victories he wants to keep on [winning](#), but he also wants to keep it fun. And he has been told by his father, who he goes out to train with, how to lose. That can be one of the big issues with coaches.

'It is about doing your best, but if you are doing your best and not always winning then it has to be about something else.'

And that notion holds true whatever level you are competing at.

'Look at Team Sky,' adds Marion. 'More than half are domestiques, so for them it is about winning for the team and helping one rider win. Without people like Mikel Landa, Geraint Thomas and Michal Kwiatkowski, Chris Froome would find winning a lot more challenging.'

Beyond the call of duty

It must be particularly difficult for those not in love with playing sport to get their heads around the fact that arduous training can actually be hugely enjoyable.

Venus and Serena Williams epitomise this contradiction in terms.

Their father, and childhood coach, Richard, has been criticised for his relentless approach to training, raising his daughters to be world-beating tennis players from the age of four. But the Williams sisters insist they would never have continued with their exhausting schedule if they hadn't loved every minute of being on court.

Club runners, meanwhile, will know all about fun-like training.

'It's a killer', will probably be the standard response of middle or long distance runners if asked to summarise the interval training in a few words. And yet some seasoned runners get a masochistic sort of pleasure out of the tortuous sprint sessions.

The term for this is [hedonic treadmill](#), coined by University of Pennsylvania psychologist professor Paul Rozin, which describes how humans can enjoy initially negative physical experiences and [pursuits](#), when they are reassured that no harm will come to them.'

Marion is part of this club.

'I loved pushing myself over and above the call of duty,' she says. 'If other athletes don't or they don't see the point, then they are probably not cut out for the job.'

'The athlete has their say too remember. If they want to improve and they know that is what is required to get there, they will do the work.

'In cycling, the time trial is probably the most brutal event on the road. It is just you against the clock and you are always going to suffer.

'I remember the interval sessions well, but also the "bucket trainer sessions", where you have a bucket next to your trainer to vomit into should you need to. But for me the hardest training, which I loved, was the cross-country running season. That's the closest I came to throwing up during an event. But I felt that it was helping me take another step up and it was great.'

'Which I loved... it was great'. Those throwaway lines merit repeating. Any participant who does not enjoy consistently pushing themselves out of their comfort zone – whose aspiration level does not match their preparation levels – should perhaps, as Marion suggests, let go of their ambitions to compete at the highest level and 'make it about something else' instead.

Difference between pain and discomfort

[Talent coaches](#) are tip-toeing on a tightrope and must be continuously alert to the dangers of overload, while being aware of each of their athletes' physical ceiling on pain and suffering.

Chris Froome and Mo Farah's tolerance for suffering may be far greater than our own after a lifetime of rigorous training, but even the bodies and minds of champions will crack under poor management.

Many coaches have an aversion to the rallying cry 'no pain, no gain' because, if taken literally, it can have damaging repercussions. They emphasise the subtle but significant distinction between pain and discomfort, and claim the two words should not be confused.

Pain is what you feel when you pull a hamstring, tear a muscle or go into spasm after ignoring the tell-tale signs of your body that you are overdoing things. Discomfort is going into the red and enduring a few moments' suffering during intense bursts of exercise as your muscles burn with lactic acid build-up and your lungs feel ready to burst.

Marion adds: 'That's why it's all about balance. Coaches who don't like that motto are really talking about the mental [pressure](#). Once there is too much mental pressure then injuries can mount up because the athlete will not be clear-minded enough to make the right decision. That's when the springs start popping.'

The ethical considerations of pushing children too far, too quickly, too young have come into sharp focus in recent times with media exposés of Premier League football academies.

Their greed and ambition are threatening to destroy a generation of children, worse Rick Broadbent in [The Times](#), with academies 'hoovering up 11-year-olds'.

There is a growing tendency to rush children's progress and being forward the 'business end' we spoke of earlier – increasing the risk of burnout, injury and [mental health issues](#), with the element of fun falling by the wayside as [early specialisation](#), early professionalisation and undignified commercialisation take a pernicious grip. The article, which quotes a whistleblowing youth coach, argues that competitive instincts need to come from within, not be forced on children by coaches or [parents](#), so that they are put under unacceptable amounts pressure from a young age.

The article begins: 'A teenage prodigy gets his big move to a Premier League club. Deals are done, backs are slapped. Suddenly, at the age of 14, the boy is the family's main breadwinner. Initially, he thrives, but then he comes under increasing pressure from his parents to pay the rent. Football becomes bereft of fun. The teenage dream is crushed so savagely that the future star becomes an alcoholic.'

Little league dads

It is a sorry state of affairs indeed when other people's self-interest comes at the expense of an athlete's enjoyment of sport and physical activity. And yet parents and grass-roots coaches can be unwittingly guilty by forcing their own expectations onto their children in the name of athletic development.

It is a moral issue that often rears its head in the United States (and, sadly, this country too), where overbearing parents exert a damaging influence over their offspring.

'I'm not sure what it is like now but, when I was growing up [in the United States] young baseball players always used to have "little league dads" who used to come to the games and just scream from the sidelines either at their kids or the opponents and it was just horrible,' says Marion.

'A lot of it is parents living through their kids. They want their kids to achieve what they didn't achieve so they get too caught up in it and it can become a pressure for the budding athlete.'

Pushing athletes in the quest for performance gain is fraught with pitfalls then, and there is plenty to ponder here for coaches at every level.

Pleasure and pain (or discomfort) certainly make strange bedfellows, and striking the right balance between improving cardiovascular fitness and doing physical and psychological harm to your athletes can be a challenge.

The important fact to remember is that exercise and training should never impact negatively on the sporting experience.

As the headline of this article states: Training may sometimes have to be gruelling but it should always be fun.

For a physiotherapist's view on [how much a coach should push their players](#), read my interview with ConnectedCoaches member [Abduriz Jones](#).

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