



## Running is the devil

By Risto Pakarinen

If you could see me now, I'm fairly confident that you wouldn't just nod and say, "now there's a runner if I ever saw one." You'd probably say something like, "excuse me, my printer doesn't work, maybe you can help me?"

And of course, you'd be sort of right, except that I couldn't help you with the printer problem.

I am a short and stocky little dude, with most of my body mass unevenly distributed around my torso and thighs. I look nothing like the Steve Prefontaine and the Haile Gebreselassies of the world. I like to run, but only up to 30 meters.

I talk about running quite a bit, and I do dream about running a marathon – simply because it seems like a tough (and cool) thing to do.

A friend of mine has run 20 marathons. Another one probably five. On two separate occasions, I've cheered them on, and one time I ran alongside a buddy of mine, for about 100 meters. So when I say that I have run the Helsinki City Marathon but that "I didn't finish", it's not a complete lie.

It's a stretch, sure, but stretching is important, too.

Of course I run. I jog, I run to the bus, and sometimes when I run errands, I actually do run errands, and I've been seen running something by the boss, literally, too. I've just never been a long-distance runner.

(This info is completely unverified and is based on my own memories. I doubt that a three-year-old could run a long distance anyway so I feel safe with my statement.)

I'm more of a sprinter. Everything I do, I do fast. I talk fast, I move fast, I walk fast, and I ride my bike to the city as fast as I possibly can. I eat like the Tasmanian Devil, and I speed read. I never take 30-minute showers, because three will

do.

Running just for the sake of running has never been my thing. Now, throw in a ball (or a puck), and I'll chase it for the rest of the day.

I did represent my school in the city championships, running the 60-meter dash. It was a fun day, I made the semifinal - I'd like to think, so it was probably just the second round - and was beat by a future Finnish Olympian. The most memorable thing about the day was that we were allowed to go straight home from the races, on our own.

I didn't know which bus to take.

I walked home.

Around the same time, encouraged by the moderate success at the school races and a buddy who ran cross country races, I also participated in one of those. It's been 30 years or so, and most of the race was a blur to me as it happened, but I can only remember the start and the finish. I have no idea how I did, but I wasn't last. Or first.

Or even second, that I do remember. Because my buddy finished second.

It took me another ten years, and a move to another city to be back on the track team, but in high school, I suited up for the 100-meter sprint and long jump.

Of course it doesn't mean that I haven't run, a lot, in my life. On the contrary. Running has always been a big part of the off-season training for hockey, a sport I did and do take seriously.

I have no problem working out at the gym. I'll bench press, leg press, curl and squat all day if I have to. Or, if I don't have to run.

Because, and I don't exaggerate this one bit, when I run, every step is battle, and a test of my mental state. My brain's default is to stop, not to take another step.

August has always been the best part of the year - even today with my hockey playing days long behind me - because that's when the team hit the ice and stopped running.

Being able to run is great, though. I've had two summers ruined by injuries. The first one, with a knee, kept me from running for two and half months, from May to mid-August, just in time to join the team when it hit the ice. And the second one, playing basketball and tearing my a ligament in my ankle. I rode my green Peugeot bike more than ever, and did fancy workouts at the gym during the time I had the cast around my foot.

I remember walking out of the hospital, then taking a test run with a smile on my face. To the car.

I peaked early, too, making one of my best runs ever at the age of 13. It was a good ten kilometers, and afterwards I was praised by one of the biggest legends in Finnish hockey. Back in 1978, I spent a week at Finnish Hockey Hall of Famer Lauri Mononen's summer cottage. During the week, he signed my training diary every day, making sure I did at least something.

And we sure did. Mononen is famous for his on-and-off style of practice. When he works out, he goes all out, not holding back anything. And when he's off, he's off. That week, he was on, going for long runs, running in the woods, sprinting around the trees, deking them, taking interval sprints on a close-by soccer field, running backwards, and throwing huge rocks over his head.

That's your full body workout.

I did the best I could, but of course, he was a grown man, having just returned from the WHA's Phoenix Roadrunners - we drove to the cottage in his sweet Oldmobile - and would win the Swiss championship after that summer, and I was 11, maybe 140cm, and weighed 40 kilos.

But, when he asked me to join him on a longer run on Friday night, when my parents would come and picked me up, I said sure. The deal was that he could run a little faster when he felt that my pace wasn't a challenge, and that I'd then

wait for him to turn around and come back, and that's when I'd turn around and run back home with him.

Maybe it was two kilometers, maybe four, maybe five, I have no idea, but there came the point when Mr Mononen took off, and I saw him disappear around the bend. It was a beautiful summer night, the kind that Finland is famous for. The sun was slowly disappearing behind the forest.

The sun disappeared behind the forest when I finally came to the house. I had heard people talk about the house, that something strange was supposedly going on at the - this is the 1970s, people - "Gypsy House".

And I thought I heard something.

I picked up the pace when another familiar thing happened. Something that always happened to me. My ingestion system felt it was time to empty the load. Right there and then. I think it maybe the shaking, my bouncing, but my stomach doesn't like running, either.

Not now, and not when I was trying to run past the Gypsy House as fast as possible. So, and I may disappoint Mr Mononen here, but I stopped. I stood around, torn between the need to go to the bathroom, and the need to run away from the house. I had "gone to the woods" many times in the past, but I wasn't going to do it there. Not with the gypsies there, and my parents driving up towards us.

I just stood there for a minute, maybe, hardly breathing, when I saw somebody on the yard. And I sprinted again, and kept on running, despite the noise, and the footsteps I am sure I heard behind me. I just ran, like I was running for my life. I went on until I saw Lauri come back towards me.

He was impressed. "I never believed you'd make it this far," he said, when he signed my training diary that night. And my dad was proud.

What I like about running, actually, is that it's a solitary thing. I can go for a run, right now, if I want to. (By now, you should know what the chances of that happening are). I also do think that running is the single best way to get in shape so

I try to keep at it. I've run in Canada, I ran around our neighbourhood when we moved here to get an overview of it, I ran across and around Helsinki when we lived there, a few years ago, I went for a run every day at my in-law's summer cottage, and every summer, when we're back in the city where I went through high school, I go for a run or two, on the old paths, past our old house, my old school, and old friends' houses.

And when I spent six months in Harbor Beach, Michigan, I ran. Partly, because I was still a hockey player, and running was a part of the training regime the coach had given me - even if I knew I wouldn't play for him the next season.

In the Michigan countryside, the roads are straight, probably first designed on a map, with a ruler, than just built accordingly. Each intersection a mile apart so it's easy to track the distance.

Most often, I ran in the evenings, two, three, four, maybe five miles at a time.

Well, the coach's program said five, but I think I converted it to kilometers, with a favorable 1:1 ratio. But, I did at least go through the motions, I ran three four times a week, come rain or 88-degree scorcher. I knew 88 degrees Fahrenheit wasn't the same as 88 degrees Celsius, and fresh out of high school, I actually figured out the mathematical formula for converting the temperature, while there, using the two zero-points as my guideline.

But it was too hot, so I only ran once during the day, and instead, did my running in the evening.

My running impressed my host family so much that they signed me up for the Harbor Beach 5K run, basically against my recommendation. But I finally gave in when Ryan, the 7-year-old, said that "maybe you'll win a trophy."

And because we were buddies, and because Ryan didn't seem to have too many buddies, I wanted to win a trophy for him.

On the day of the race, I was nervous. I was maybe fooling my hosts with my running, but I wasn't fooling myself. I knew I wasn't a runner, and I knew I

hadn't been working out too hard. But I thought that maybe there was a chance, still. Harbor Beach only had a population of about five thousand, how big a race were we talking about anyway.

Pretty big, I saw, as soon as we got to the registration to pick up my number. The trophies were on display there, and Ryan pepped me again, saying he HOPED I'd win one. "Sure," I said, as I watched other runners stretch and change into their serious running gear.

I was already wearing shorts. I didn't do stretching. I just stood there, watching the others.

BANG! And the runners were off.

I took off like a human cannonball, taking the lead - and I kid you not - right away. I had got a good inside spot on the starting line, so when then starter fired his gun, I was ready. I led the pack to the first curve. I could hear Ryan and the rest of the Schwartzes, even Big Bob, I want to remember, cheer me on.

I found my rhythm fast, and I felt pretty good. Maybe I just might get one of those trophies.

Unfortunately, my rhythm wasn't enough. One by one, the other runners ran by me, and with each new one to pass me by, I tried to hang on there, and use them as my rabbit, to get me back on track. But each time, I failed.

I never got back on track. Instead, I got off the track. Literally.

Having been left behind so much that I didn't even see the backs of the other runners, I was pretty much running alone. I know I just said that was what I liked about running, but I couldn't take much pleasure out of it then. The route went through Harbor Beach's affluent neighbourhood, alongside nice, big houses and their fences.

I was probably trying to come up with an explanation to Ryan because, in my thoughts, I missed a turn, and kept on running the wrong way. One of the offi-

cial CAUGHT UP WITH ME, and told me to get back on the track. I did, actually sped up a little, and just as I came to the turn I had missed, I saw somebody coming to the curve from the other direction.

I wasn't last. There was somebody behind me.

I ran the remaining few hundred meters as fast as I could - note: I'm not saying fast, just as fast as I could - and crossed the finishing line tired and unhappy.

Nobody said anything. Obviously, Ryan could forget the trophy. I'm pretty sure that Big Bob thought he had just witnessed a complete waste of money, but he never said anything. I put on a jacket, and met with the family at the car.

"Too bad," said Ryan. "But you know what? We're gonna get pizza!"

And that was that.

Just as many times as I've stopped running, I've always picked it up again. I recognize the fact that running is simply a great way to exercise, and probably the most efficient way to get in shape. Lose weight, I mean. And losing weight is something I know something about. And gaining weight. And losing it again.

In the mid-1990s, I dug up my running shoes and hit the road, again. One time, my then-girlfriend joined me on a jogging trip, on a quiet country road in Finland. The road was straight as arrow, and the plan was easy. I'd run to the end of the road, where it made a T with another road, turn around, and run back home. Nice and easy, in a pace comfortable enough for me to talk.

"You're always jumping up and down, it looks really funny," my girlfriend said.

"Why don't you just run?"

I was. That's just my style. So I'm bouncy. I don't have the long stride of a miler, I have the explosive step of a hockey player.

Anyway, as we turned around at the T, she left me biting the dust, on that straight

and lonely country road in Finland, until all I could see in the dark were the white sweat pants she was wearing. A few years later, slightly slimmer, I walked out of the relationship.

On a side note, I have never gone jogging with my wife, and I think I'm going to keep it that way.

Why do I even care? Why not run after a ball, or skate after a puck, which is so much more fun than running anyway? Maybe I'm delusional and still think that I should be able to do everything. If a friend of mine runs a marathon, I should be able to do it, too. If a friend of mine jogs five miles every morning, why couldn't I?

Mostly, it just about running, though. I don't feel like I need to benchpress 150 kilos just because a buddy does, or that I need to solve the New York Times crossword every day, like another friend.

There's just something about running that makes me feel like I should be able to do more.

Every spring, in April, May, when the hockey season ends, I start to plan my summer training. Like a man with a pregnant wife all of a sudden sees pregnant women everywhere - or a man who wants to buy a Ferrari sees only Ferraris around him ... I suppose - all I see people do in the spring is run. I see joggers everywhere, and every one of them makes me feel like a cheat.

I still stop before a crosswalk, and let the joggers run across the street without losing their pace and their rhythm. I smile as I signal to them to keep running.

Because I know. I'm something of a runner, too. Right now, I'm thinking about running the New York Marathon.