

BE A COMPETITOR

How does one compete? What does competitiveness mean? Many people react “competitively” whenever another person enters the situation; true, some seem to be challenged and energized more than others. But such ability, while based upon inherited assets, is primarily the product of training, both cultural and personally.

Throughout his career, Herb Elliott assumed that you could only produce in competition what you have created and suffered through in training. His tactics were simple and largely self-centered; to run his own best race and let the opposition stay with him if they could. **That meant that competition was primarily a struggle over himself, that unless his steel was forged in the fires of self-mastery during training, it could never be hard enough to withstand the fierce heat of competition of others.**

“Somehow, to me running is a challenge, demanding mastery of the body as well as the winning of races...(then later, as he described his training for the 1960 Olympics) I set off...determined to finish really tired and satisfied. I squibbed on it without realizing it and finished too fresh. It annoyed me. I began to think that I had lost the capacity to hurt myself...I must be careful and see that I cultivate this capacity again. I mustn't become a subconscious squib. I was so annoyed that I did three laps of the shrine hill to finish off...”

But, you protest, this is the attitude of a world-renowned athlete who has trained a naturally competitive mind to control a naturally competitive body. What does a competitive spirit mean to the beginner, to the inept, to the doubtful?

First, it should be repeated that all such traits as competitiveness are present in each of us within a wide range of possible development. True, this range differs in width from one man to another, in the same though not necessarily in equal measure as such physical qualities as that of endurance. As with endurance, neglect or abuse produces performances at the lower level of this range; desire plus wise and long nurtured effort at the upper level. But competitiveness is far more a sensitive quality than endurance, more easily bruised, stunted, even destroyed altogether.

Second, competitive spirit is directly related to a conflict between inclination and opposition within and without, between the anticipation and the pain of the effort, between the will to win and the fear of failure. When competitive spirit fails, a disorganization or loss of control takes place that appears to others to be physical in nature. They say, “He tied up.” But they might better say, “His mind lost control.”

Taken from *Modern Training for Running*, by Ken Doherty