

NEARLY man

FILMMAKER ALEX VERO'S AIM OF QUALIFYING FOR THE 2008 BEIJING OLYMPIC MARATHON PROVED TO BE A STEP TOO FAR, BUT HIS JOURNEY IS NOT OVER JUST YET...

As a 16-stone, heavy-drinking, asthmatic, smoking slob, I decided to throw myself into a gruelling training regime. The goal was to make the cut for the marathon at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing – and make a documentary of my journey. Why? Credibility. Of course ambition, the joy of running and personal challenge all played their part. But when the *Road to Beijing* project culminates at the finish line of this year's Flora London Marathon, I will be able to look back and say I gave it everything.

I always hated running as a child. I have particularly bad memories of the obligatory cross-country sessions at secondary school. Wheezing and fatigued, I'd lumber around the course, often turning the final corner to find that the finish line had been packed away and everyone had gone – a demoralising and humiliating experience that left me with little motivation to ever run again.

By 16 years old, all I did was play video games and eat junk food. As a result, my weight had ballooned to 17 stone, and my doctor explained that I was facing a lifetime of obesity-related illness. The news hit me hard, and I resolved to turn my life around. Under the cover of darkness, I started to run a three-mile circuit around the school three evenings a week. Soon the

weight started to drop off, and I gained confidence – not to mention extra energy. Crucially, I started to enjoy running.

Aside from a brief blip, as you might expect of someone in their first boozy year at university, I kept up my running. In 2001, I entered the Flora London Marathon. No one thought I would be able to get all the way round. Crossing that finish line for the first time still rates highly as one of my best experiences ever. OK, 4:21 hardly made me Gebrselassie, but it was a start. Two marathons down the line and I had cut my PB down to 3:35. But I genuinely thought that I'd peaked – that I couldn't possibly go any faster. Exasperated, I contemplated hanging up my running shoes and moving on to a different challenge.

I didn't have to wait long. While sitting my finals, a friend suggested that we enter Marathon des Sables – the infamous seven-day, 150-mile footrace across the Sahara. I thought he was crazy, but the next day we signed up, and six months later we were baking under the Saharan sun on the start line. I nearly died of dehydration twice on the way to the finish line. But the experience taught me an important lesson: your body can give more than you think it can.

In October 2005, my running regime really hit the brakes. I had developed a Pilonidal sinus – a group of ingrown hairs at the base of

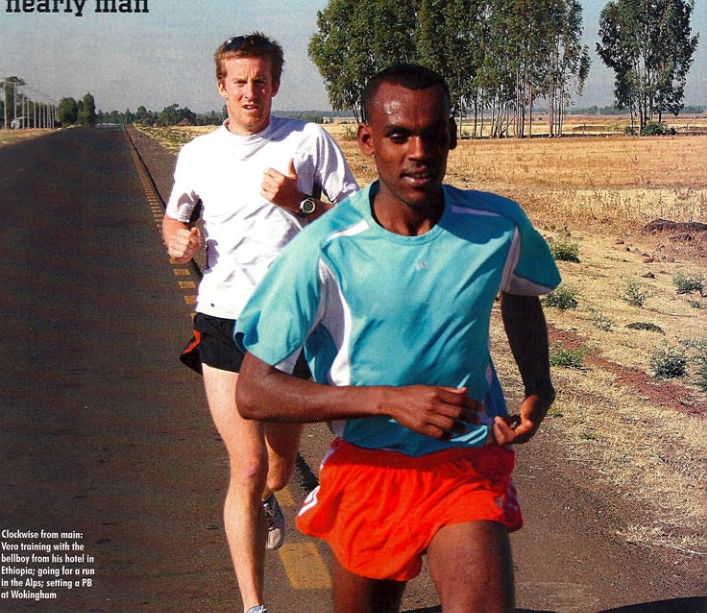


Jan 2006: Pre-training, Vero weighed in at 16 stone

Eyes on the prize: Alex Vero on The Mall in London, where he aims to complete a sub-2:30 marathon next month



nearly man



Clockwise from main: Vero training with the bellboy from his hotel in Ethiopia; going for a run in the Alps; setting a PB at Wokingham

the spine. It may not sound serious, but six weeks on from the operation to remove them, I was still recuperating in bed. Fortunately, it gave me the time I needed to cook up my new challenge – one that would push me to my very limits.

It dawned on me that with the exception of Paula Radcliffe and Jon Brown, I'd barely heard of any British marathon runners. Was it just the case that there weren't any? And, if so, why? I

As a filmmaker this subject captivated me. I started to wonder how far I could I progress as a marathon runner if I threw myself into training. I was convinced it would make a compelling documentary. I wanted to give the audience an idea of not only how hard marathon training can be, but how far you can progress with a little talent and a lot of determination – and maybe even qualify for Beijing. Pie in the sky? Perhaps.

"I took the attitude that anything was possible until proved otherwise"

did my research and discovered there were a few very good British marathon runners, but none were even close to being in the same league as the Kenyan or Ethiopian runners. In 1985, 105 British men had run under 2:20 for the London Marathon, but only a handful had managed the same feat in 2007. As a nation, we appeared to be getting worse at the 26.2-mile.

But I took the attitude that anything was possible until proved otherwise and I immediately started training and filming.

Suffering from shin splints because I was overtraining, my first 5K runs around Hyde Park often took over half an hour to complete. After what was a painfully slow eight weeks of training, I entered the Wokingham Half-Marathon,

setting myself a goal of running sub-1:40. It was a painful experience, because I was still somewhat out of shape, but I managed to finish in 1:35. I had a really solid base to build on. It was a good start.

That summer, I joined the Serpentine Running Club so I that could take advantage of the top coaching advice on offer from the like of Bruce Tulloh. I also had a full-on physiological assessment, which suggested I would struggle to ever break 2:45 for the marathon. According to that, I was already beaten. In fact, it only motivated me to prove it wrong.

Eight months into the project, I was continuously battling to increase the mileage and intensity to meet my self-imposed goals without getting injured. But I knew I had made some steady progress, so I decided to see just how far I had come. I entered the Majorca Marathon knowing that if I finished in under two hours and 45 minutes I would be able to get the necessary investment to train full-time as a runner and subsequent funds to make a high-budget documentary.

Let'sRun.com ignited 20 pages of discussion on the project. Unfortunately, most of the comments suggested that what I was trying to do was egotistical and disrespectful to Marathon runners. I even received abusive emails. But for every negative email I received, I got a positive one.

The Paris Marathon turned into a sticky affair – and not just because of the muggy conditions. At 10km, as I was trying to avoid the ensuing mayhem at a drinks station, I tore a muscle deep in my hip. Ten kilometres later I had to stop to stretch, which only made it worse and forced me to walk the majority of the second half of the race. I was absolutely gutted, and by now was starting to get the feeling that this project had been doomed from the off.

Realistically, I knew the motivation was over. It completely sapped away any projection left in me. In the following six weeks I managed to run a total of 40km. But I still wanted give the marathon one last go. Topped up with painkillers, I ran the Prague Marathon and made it round in 2:57. It felt good to finish – as if I had some closure on the project.

I took things very easy for the next few weeks, letting my hip recover fully. I took part in a few mini-triathlons, which was a welcome break from the pressure associated with the project. Then I received an email from the captain of the Belgrave Harriers asking if I'd like to join in one of coach Frank Horwill's endurance sessions down at the Battersea Park track. I turned up and after 10 minutes found myself retching by the side of the track. I was totally out of my league and embarrassed at how far behind everyone I was. Oddly, the experience gave me just the kick I needed. I was going to give the project one last push. I knew that I would never be able to get to the 2:15 original target that I had set myself but I was determined to get as close as I could.

Fourteen weeks later I lined up at the ING Amsterdam Half-Marathon. To no one's surprise, I wasn't 100 per cent race fit.

Three days before the race, I came down with a cold, and probably shouldn't have competed at all. But I knew I had to give it my best shot. It turned out to be a great decision. Not only did I run a PB of 1:13:45 for the half-marathon, but I also ran PBs for 5km and 10km along the way. Finally something had gone to plan.

In January, I was forced to cancel a three-week training trip to Kenya because of the horrific bloodshed that occurred there after the elections, but we were able to arrange a last-minute change to Ethiopia.

The trip was a truly inspirational experience. While staying in Addis Ababa, I trained with Mengistu Abebe, the bellboy from our hotel. He turned out to be an exceptionally talented runner – on a par with the best runners in the UK. I was

also able to catch up with Richard Nerurkar, one of Britain's top marathon runners in the 1990s, and organiser of the Great Ethiopian Run. I also got the chance to interview Haile Gebrselassie, who had just returned from winning the Dubai Marathon in the second-fastest time ever. It was a surreal experience to be talking to probably the greatest distance runner of all time about a project that started off with some overweight slob chugging around a park.

My journey has been a veritable running odyssey, where success and failure have gone hand in hand. Along the way I have learnt that we all have genetic limits on how far we can progress in running. It's probably fair to say most of us will never get anywhere near these, but the biggest limitations to our progression are more often than not self-imposed. The one most valuable piece of advice I received was from top coach Keith Anderson: more is not always best. I was guilty too many times of pushing myself too hard. If I had followed Keith's advice to the word, who knows how I might have progressed?

On returning from Ethiopia, I felt stronger and faster than ever, so I went back for another physiological assessment. The results were staggering, suggesting that I am capable of running a sub-2:30 marathon. I honestly believe I can do that on April 13, but we'll see. Whatever happens, I am going to retire from marathon running after London – for the time being, at least. My plan is to take up triathlon. And although I'll always train hard, I am going to take part for the enjoyment of the sport – and that alone.

See www.theroadtobeijing.co.uk to read more about Alex's journey. **CB**



Coming into the race I felt really confident. At 30km I felt relaxed and comfortable. I knew if I kept it together and finished the last 10km in 40 minutes or less, the investment was in the bag. The marathon can be a very cruel mistress. Turning the corner for the final stretch, I was confronted by a blisteringly hot offshore breeze. I felt my strength suddenly evaporate in the 30-degree heat, and just 2km from the finish line I collapsed with heat exhaustion. When I came around I vowed to continue and staggered over the line in 2:58 – investment lost, project over.

I'm quite stubborn. I refused to believe, so I decided to give it another shot, setting my sights on the Paris Marathon the following April. I trained like a demon, but concentrated more on quality than quantity. In the build-up, I took another stab at the Wokingham Half and knocked 20 minutes off my PB, coming in at one hour and 15 minutes. Maybe I could resurrect the project?

Between the Majorca and Paris marathons I noticed my majoree was finally starting to generate some interest. One thread on

Let'sRun.com ignited 20 pages of discussion on the project. Unfortunately, most of the comments suggested that what I was trying to do was egotistical and disrespectful to Marathon runners. I even received abusive emails. But for every negative email I received, I got a positive one.

The Paris Marathon turned into a sticky affair – and not just because of the muggy conditions. At 10km, as I was trying to avoid the ensuing mayhem at a drinks station, I tore a muscle deep in my hip. Ten kilometres later I had to stop to stretch, which only made it worse and forced me to walk the majority of the second half of the race. I was absolutely gutted, and by now was starting to get the feeling that this project had been doomed from the off.

Realistically, I knew the motivation was over. It completely sapped away any projection left in me. In the following six weeks I managed to run a total of 40km. But I still wanted give the marathon one last go. Topped up with painkillers, I ran the Prague Marathon and made it round in 2:57. It felt good to finish – as if I had some closure on the project.

I took things very easy for the next few weeks, letting my hip recover fully. I took part in a few mini-triathlons, which was a welcome break from the pressure associated with the project. Then I received an email from the captain of the Belgrave Harriers asking if I'd like to join in one of coach Frank Horwill's endurance sessions down at the Battersea Park track. I turned up and after 10 minutes found myself retching by the side of the track. I was totally out of my league and embarrassed at how far behind everyone I was. Oddly, the experience gave me just the kick I needed. I was going to give the project one last push. I knew that I would never be able to get to the 2:15 original target that I had set myself but I was determined to get as close as I could.

Fourteen weeks later I lined up at the ING Amsterdam Half-Marathon. To no one's surprise, I wasn't 100 per cent race fit.

Three days before the race, I came down with a cold, and probably shouldn't have competed at all. But I knew I had to give it my best shot. It turned out to be a great decision. Not only did I run a PB of 1:13:45 for the half-marathon, but I also ran PBs for 5km and 10km along the way. Finally something had gone to plan.

In January, I was forced to cancel a three-week training trip to Kenya because of the horrific bloodshed that occurred there after the elections, but we were able to arrange a last-minute change to Ethiopia.

The trip was a truly inspirational experience. While staying in Addis Ababa, I trained with Mengistu Abebe, the bellboy from our hotel. He turned out to be an exceptionally talented runner – on a par with the best runners in the UK. I was

also able to catch up with Richard Nerurkar, one of Britain's top marathon runners in the 1990s, and organiser of the Great Ethiopian Run. I also got the chance to interview Haile Gebrselassie, who had just returned from winning the Dubai Marathon in the second-fastest time ever. It was a surreal experience to be talking to probably the greatest distance runner of all time about a project that started off with some overweight slob chugging around a park.

My journey has been a veritable running odyssey, where success and failure have gone hand in hand. Along the way I have learnt that we all have genetic limits on how far we can progress in running. It's probably fair to say most of us will never get anywhere near these, but the biggest limitations to our progression are more often than not self-imposed. The one most valuable piece of advice I received was from top coach Keith Anderson: more is not always best. I was guilty too many times of pushing myself too hard. If I had followed Keith's advice to the word, who knows how I might have progressed?

On returning from Ethiopia, I felt stronger and faster than ever, so I went back for another physiological assessment. The results were staggering, suggesting that I am capable of running a sub-2:30 marathon. I honestly believe I can do that on April 13, but we'll see. Whatever happens, I am going to retire from marathon running after London – for the time being, at least. My plan is to take up triathlon. And although I'll always train hard, I am going to take part for the enjoyment of the sport – and that alone.

See www.theroadtobeijing.co.uk to read more about Alex's journey. **CB**

Alex Vero's race tips

Listen up
Get yourself into a positive frame of mind. Music works best for me, so I play my favourite rousing tunes on my iPod shuffle, such as Linkin Park and Stronger by Kanye West.

Hang back
After a race settles down, try to stick to the back of a group of runners at your pace and concentrate on the heels of their shoes. Wait until the opportune moment before moving on or you will find them tagging on the back of you.

Count it out
Towards the end of a race when it's starting to hurt, try counting to 50 slowly. I find it tricks my mind into thinking the race will be over soon. By the end, 250 metres will have passed without you even realising.