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# Get tough.

by Jeannie P. Dahnk, 2003–2004 VSB President

Thousands of Americans, including many Virginia lawyers, run in marathons in October and November. Whether the races last three hours or five and a half hours, 26.2 miles is a long haul. You have to be tough. Attorneys seem drawn to distance running, probably in large part due to the demands of the race—preparation, concentration and endurance. Law school teaches the importance of preparation. As new lawyers, we learn the value of concentrating on the task at hand. And all members of the bar learn endurance—to get tough.

We often discuss and write about and teach how we are different from other occupations. We regulate ourselves, require our colleagues to adopt high professional standards, and we demand of ourselves a concern for the public good and how we may promote it. At seminars and at meetings of our bar organizations, and even informally, we rarely talk about how difficult and demanding our work can be, or about how we need to get tough.

Runners gain endurance by running. Practitioners get stronger by doing their job day in and day out. Who doesn't find their fifth personal injury trial or closing or pendent lite hearing easier than their first? Many runners, however, improve their competitive edge by building their "core strengths." Core strength allows strenuous and prolonged effort with less risk of injury and more rapid recovery. To compete frequently, athletes learn to get tough.

Lawyers can build their core strengths. Here are some modest suggestions offered not by a master, but by one still in training.

**1. Remember the basics.** Honesty, knowledge, courtesy and dedication to the client form the foundation for any career. In your personal training program, review and decide if your practice adheres to the basics. Just like a runner can't go faster by skipping water breaks and expect to finish, lawyers have to always incorporate the basics.

**2. Assess your performance.** How are you doing? Are you making a living? Are your clients happy? Do your colleagues respect you? Are you happy?

**3. Have a goal.** How many hours do you want to bill? How many hours do you want to work? When do you want to retire? What do you want to accomplish?

**4. Demand more of yourself than anyone else does.** Don't base your expectations on what your clients or your partners expect—excel because of your own sense of quality and performance.

**5. Pace yourself.** How hard you can push yourself without making mistakes, or yelling at the kids when you go home? And, make sure you do go home. Take one call, one case, one client at a time.

**6. Celebrate your wins and understand your losses.** If you can't learn from a bad outcome, it will happen again. If you can't rejoice, at least internally, in a job well done, you should be thinking about doing something else.

**7. Work out with a group.** Pick a bar activity or association of people who do what you do—or who are interested in what you are interested in. Look for the group that has "heavy hitters" in it—and lawyers with your level of experience. A runner told me he made sure he was the slowest in the group in which he chose to do his long run training—to push himself that much harder.

**8. Get tough.** Compromise only when you have planned to. This is the most difficult thing about the long haul. Opportunities abound to "let up" or slow down. Don't give in to your desire to return an angry comment in kind or to resort to sarcasm—even when you know you could justify it. Don't accept less of yourself than your best even when you realize that no one is watching or paying attention to how you are doing.

Like long distance running, the practice of law is a lonely pursuit. Each of us needs to get tough and stay tough so that we can last, benefit our clients and make a contribution to our society. Most importantly, we need to be tough to find joy in what we have chosen for ourselves—the long run. 🍷