



Scott was an age group winner and place third overall at the 2009 Townsville Marathon.

Relentless Regeneration

GETTING OLD JUST SORT OF CREEPS UP ON YOU.

There are ways to speed up the process (believe me, I've tried a few). But you can't stop the slow, unrelenting march to deterioration. Yet interestingly, this depressing fact is the key to the older runner's salvation – the process of regeneration works just as well in the opposite direction.

The truth is this process is slow but you can be assured that once you start, at whatever age, the benefits will follow. Like the well known advertisement for Pantene hair conditioner says, "It won't happen overnight, but it will happen!"

That's why the following story begins with me putting the brakes on my own deterioration, and ends, in time, with my near total transformation.

I'm a 45-year-old Australian expat living in Japan. I've lived here for the best part of 20 years. Six years ago, I ran my first marathon in Osaka in 4:05.47. Late last year, I did one in 2:45.11. My first half marathon took me 1:39.32 – my most recent was completed in 1:18.50. I was running 47.22 for 10km in 2004 and now, in 2010, my PB is 35.38. While there are, of course, more impressive records of progression and faster Masters runners (I'm no Keith Bateman!), I believe my tale holds relevance for the average runner not because I'm special, but because I'm neither genetically gifted nor particularly motivated. It took a jolt to get me started – then the momentum snowballed from there.

Not long after my 40th birthday, I was reversing the car out of the garage, on my way to visit my newborn son and wife in hospital, when I caught a glimpse of my bloated head pro-

filed in the rear view mirror. I hit the brakes, grabbed the mirror, turning it a couple of times to take in the full picture. Good Lord! What had become of me? I'd moved to Japan 20 years

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earlier, a young healthy surfer. I had since worked and studied my way into teaching at university, in the process, smoking, drinking and eating myself into a caricature of the Nutty Professor. I wasn't the boy my sister knew, or even the man my wife married. Slapping the mirror in disgust I sighed, "Man, you've got to get on to that!"

So I did. The next day I gave up the cigarettes. It's something I did often over that first year. I fished out the closest thing I had to running gear – a navy blue cotton trucker's singlet,

and my old surf shorts – and I hit the road. Later than half-hour I was back, but resolved to do this as often as I needed in order not to have to look at the rotund dial I'd caught sight of that previous day. I slowly built up to run five days a week. I wasn't gauging the pace on any charts. I simply chose a pace that enabled me to jog for 30

minutes at a time without stopping. My commitment to running was beginning to build but at this stage I wasn't quite ready to trade in the Billabong boardshorts.

My first marathon changed all that. The first time almost everyone overestimates their ability and thinks they can go faster than they actually do. Anyway, my first marathon remains my slowest and most enjoyable to date. I did, like most, overestimate my ability and I underestimated just how hard it would be. But I was elated when I crossed the finish line!

Later, I read the following line by Dr George Sheehan that helped it all make sense. He wrote: "Happiness is different from pleasure. Happiness has something to do with struggling and enduring and accomplishing." That night I celebrated with a few beers, I smoked my last cigarette and the next day I bought some neoprene shorts that claimed to have a Coolmax crotch panel that "wicks away sweat" for your comfort. You definitely know you're in a process of change when your crotch is dry and your vocabulary starts to improve.

Regeneration and transformation had begun in earnest. Still, how I managed to keep going in the first few years is a bit of a mystery to me now. I guess the enthusiasm of the newbie played its role. I was able to

smile through gritted teeth despite the frustration and pain of plantar fasciitis and Iliotibial band (ITB) syndrome. Basically, I was enjoying the day-to-day – the process, not thinking too far ahead. It was all very Zen.

A friend of mine here, who practises Aikido, shared an old martial arts saying, "The Master is the one who stays on the mat five minutes longer every day than anybody else." I was only chipping away at my times at that stage but most importantly I was staying on the mat, so to speak. This is just as true for running as it is for life. As Dory from Finding Nemo says, "Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming..."

The point where I believe I finally became committed was with the discovery of Pat Carroll and his online coaching service. I could have just kept on with my own education of reading and self-experimentation. But, regeneration or not, I wasn't getting any younger and frankly, as well as not being particularly physically gifted, I'm not the fastest learner. I do know it is sometimes better to skip the trial-and-error and simply arrange for first-rate instruction.

If you have a choice between being coached online or joining a local running club, the latter is optimal. In my case, I wanted to get faster before I'd have felt comfortable joining a club here in Japan. You know, the Japanese are pretty serious about their running. I got this sense from the first few races I entered when, even though I'd be finishing, in most cases, at the back of the pack, I'd have young and old alike sprinting to the line just to beat me over it. I thought it was the Frank Shorter moustache I was sporting but even after shaving it off I'd get people throwing themselves over the line to beat me in a photo-finish marathon.

I was wrong in my assessment though. I joined a Japanese running club a year later and found the Japanese runners incredibly supportive and non-elitist. That being the case,



The online coaching advice of Pat Carroll has underpinned Scott's regeneration.

they still seem to gain heightened pleasure from beating foreigners. The slow runner stands a very real chance of being trampled to death during any of the mega-marathons here, like Tokyo.

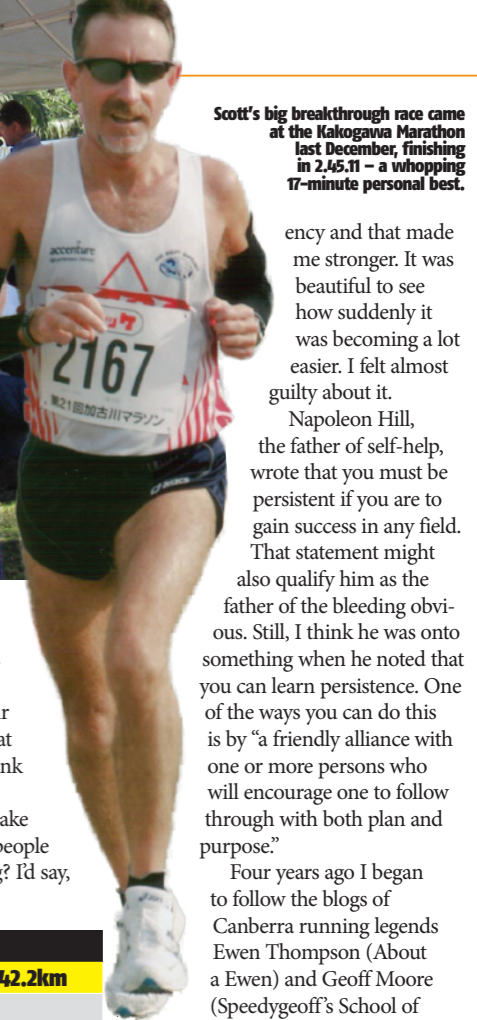
Through my contact with Pat, I met some of his real-life running group members online. Inspired by their blogs, I started my own – In the Long Run – a blog about running and living in Japan. The support of two of Pat's prominent runners, Claire and

FASTEST TIMES EACH YEAR				
Year	5km	10km	21.1km	42.2km
2003			1.39.32	
2004		45.17	1.35.08	4.05.47
2005		40.31	1.30.36	3.27.57
2006		40.10	1.28.51	3.24.40
2007		39.55	1.31.12	3.17.56
2008	19.10	39.16	1.22.56	3.03.06
2009	17.08	35.38	1.19.23	2.45.11
2010		35.42	1.18.50	

Tesso, showed me that runners are the best people. Now that is not hyperbole. When my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer, I swear, these people who I had never met face-to-face, would have, if I'd asked, jumped on a plane and come out here. Luckily, we could save them the fare as it was a misdiagnosis. I didn't lose my wife, but sadly, I did eventually lose Tesso and Claire to Facebook!

Look, I'm not an authority on the character merits of runners vis-à-vis other sports but I've played rugby

and surfed and had sprigs and fins in my back on many occasions. Never has anyone ever come at me on the track swinging a pair of running spikes! Until that happens I'll continue to think runners are special human beings. So does running make people better or do better people simply gravitate to running? I'd say, yes to both.



Scott's big breakthrough race came at the Kagogawa Marathon last December, finishing in 2:45.11 – a whopping 17-minute personal best.

ency and that made me stronger. It was beautiful to see how suddenly it was becoming a lot easier. I felt almost guilty about it.

Napoleon Hill, the father of self-help, wrote that you must be persistent if you are to gain success in any field. That statement might also qualify him as the father of the bleeding obvious. Still, I think he was onto something when he noted that you can learn persistence. One of the ways you can do this is by "a friendly alliance with one or more persons who will encourage one to follow through with both plan and purpose."

Four years ago I began to follow the blogs of Canberra running legends Ewen Thompson (About a Ewen) and Geoff Moore (Speedygeoff's School of Running). I have since become

an honorary member of their running club, the Speedy Geese. They've become my friendly alliance coaches and a great support system. Writing in one of his blog posts Speedygeoff implores, "Take action. Do not stay in your comfort zone. Be prepared for opposition. Expect to feel some doubts. Be prepared to take direction from trusted advisers. Be an 'overcomer'. Be determined to see it through. Expect to complete the action and expect to see the benefits."

The advice and humor of the 'Geese', together with many other people I've met since starting running, has given me the gift of persistence and kept me going when I may very well have regressed to my former non-running, fat-faced self.

I'm now into my seventh year of running. I'm a much better runner than I was with times at levels I couldn't have realistically expected when I strained through my first 15-minute jog.

2010-2011 training has me looking for a sub-2:30.00 marathon. Although I continue to receive all the encouragement and support I need, this kind of time is something even the most ardent would say is, maybe, beyond a man of my age. Still, nobody I know of is betting against me. We all agree you can't hold back the march of time. Yet, transformation and regeneration are just as real as the process of aging and deterioration. I believe they're not through with me. **✎**

Words & images by Scott Brown



Scott won his age group at the 2009 Kawaninagano Half Marathon.