

A Conspiracy Of Silence - Part I: Training

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"The inability to challenge our belief systems in the face of good scientific evidence is the primary limiting factor in the advancement of both health care and coaching, as well as human performance and injury prevention" (excerpt taken from "RunSmart" - 2008)

There is a conspiracy of silence in our community. It is evident in our health care, and it is evident in the world of fitness and coaching. It is a powerful undercurrent, a stealthy viral element that attacks us from all sides. Not a day goes by in which I don't witness it's effects. And the first step required to get down to the real issues in health care and fitness on a much broader scale, is to acknowledge and address it.

Much of what we experience in the context of health care and fitness is what I would term "Flat Earth Syndrome". Let me explain. For a great part of world history, civilization thought that the world was flat. It was part of the commonly-held belief system of the ages. It was actually part of the religious beliefs as well.

And then we discovered that - it wasn't. If you sailed a ship, you didn't fall off the edge of the world. You actually just kept on sailing. And suddenly, there was science to prove that the world was, indeed, spherical.

"Shhhhh, don't talk about this. We have empirical evidence — and that's all we have ever needed. We need to be careful with this science stuff, because if it takes hold, we might lose our power and control. So let's just be quiet about it. Maybe if we don't talk about it, it will go away."

But lo and behold, many people weren't ready for the science. It remained a religious issue. It was near-heresy to proclaim that the world was round. People were persecuted for their newfound beliefs. And try as science might, it was a supreme challenge to get people to move past their beliefs into the realm of "scientific evidence". But, eventually, we got there - and now look where we are. We travel to other planets, and all while watching our spherical globe circle below us.

When our belief systems are challenged - be it with religion, politics, health care, fitness, or quantum physics, we are faced with an opportunity. It is an uncomfortable one, but an opportunity nonetheless. We can go onward into the abyss simply ignoring the evidence and refusing to acknowledge that it is our beliefs that make us uncomfortable. We can become defensive to those around us who espouse different beliefs. Or we can simply open ourselves to reflection, self-assessment, and learning. We can look beyond the emotion and respond to the evidence. That is in fact a choice.

What we see in health care - and in the fitness world - is no different. It is yet another example of "Flat Earth Syndrome". In the meantime, it is also a conspiracy of silence. Maybe if we don't talk about the issues, they will go away. But they never do. If anything, they become more virulent.

With this in mind, let us take a look at fitness and coaching. And for a more specific, real-world example, let's look at the running community (in Austin and beyond) – and examine a snapshot of what has become acceptable in that community.

If we were to look at any 10 books on running, we'd find that most of them continue to promote concepts of training that do not even consider the last 20 years of sports science and physiology literature. If we were to then look at any 10 groups training for a marathon in Austin (or any other running community), we'd find a similar trend.

“But this is the way such-and-such trains” and thus that must be effective, right?

If we didn't have access to information, then this might be understandable. But the worst part is that much of the best sports science research in the world is being done right in our own backyard – inside Belmont Hall at the University of Texas – and the community in general still refuses to utilize it.

A perfect example is the “recovery run”. There is good research to support easy running immediately after your workout to foster recovery. But this is at the time of the workout – not as a means of adding miles to

your plan the next day! But if the belief is that "more miles are better", then the current version of the "recovery run" fits. It's just too bad that it takes good scientific information completely out of context.

And if we were to look beyond simple training methodologies, then we would need to examine how these training methods relate to both the success rate of the athlete and the rate of incidence of running injuries. Data from Runner's World magazine would indicate that 60% of runners will sustain an injury in any given year that will cause them to stop training. The sports sciences would indicate – consistently, I might add – that there is but one thing that correlates with running injury – and that is what is termed "training error". When you read a little more, you find that "training error" equates to "too much too soon". The rate of application of training stimulus exceeds the rate of training adaptation – and tissue injury occurs. There are also studies that would indicate that the risk of injury increases significantly at as low as 25 miles per week of training – not very high for many training programs, once you've added in all your "recovery runs" and "long runs".

And much of this information has been readily available for the last two decades.

But, if there are two aspects that are not well-controlled or methodically progressed in most group training programs, they are the total volume of training, and the rate at which it is progressed. Oh sure, they all profess to use the legendary "10% rule"; but this becomes an arbitrary value having little to no relevance to the overall training program.

community standard is a 60% injury rate then we have a major problem on our hands. When you factor in Governor Rick Perry's stated goal of creating "healthy citizens" in Texas, we now have an unacceptable public health problem. More people are running, but more people are getting injured while running.

Ask any of the major training groups locally – most won't be able to tell you their injury rates or their success rates in getting runners to their event injury-free.

And if you do get injured, you are told that it's because of your lousy genetics or your poor flexibility or any of a plethora of reasons unsubstantiated in the scientific literature. No worries, you can get that problem fixed (more on health care in article number two) and then you might even be able to jump right back into your program, if luck and timing would have it.

Where is the accountability?

Numbers such as these are abysmal if we acknowledge that the information to prevent those injuries is readily available. But – it's "the way we do things around here", and those things are an accepted community standard of behavior.

But much as Jack Nicholson proclaimed in "A Few Good Men" … as it stands right now, the community (as we know it) "can't handle the truth".

"How dare I say this", you might be asking now. "There are a lot of successful marathon training groups in Austin". Perhaps you're even thinking of a specific example of someone that has succeeded within any number of them. Don't worry, I can hear the outrage brewing in your voice. That's just the initial visceral response. But now for the choices.

Let's face it - we are in a world of very accessible information. Years ago, reference libraries like PubMed were only accessible through large universities. Now, the scientific evidence to support or refute just about anything is readily available. Part of my rationale for writing "RunSmart" was to make current sports sciences literature accessible to the masses. It contains 96 references, most of which are peer-reviewed journals. And that is only scratching the surface. It is a simple task for the athlete to become a consumer of the information. Compare outcomes. What is the injury rate in any given group training program (or any training program, for that matter)? How many make it to the start line injury-free? How many fall out of the program due to injury?

We continue to talk amongst ourselves about "base training" and the like - but don't ever provide scientific evidence to the contrary, otherwise you'll hear something akin to …

"Stone him”

“Blasphemer”

Or worse.

No matter what evidence you provide, the belief system is still the same. It's a cultural belief system. You will experience it in training groups and in discussion forums – but just don't be the one challenging the beliefs, because there is a predictable behavioral response to this. All we have to do is look back at history. When you challenge the “system”, it's amazing how much the “system” pushes back. You might hear “the believers” launch a tirade on your credibility. It might be in public or private.

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don't talk about this. We have empirical evidence – and that's all we have ever needed. We need to be careful with this science stuff, because if it takes hold, we might lose our power and control. So let's just be quiet about it. Maybe if we don't talk about it, it will go away.”

You'd almost be convinced the world is flat – all over again. A conspiracy of silence.

As they say, you can lead a runner to injury prevention and training optimization, but you cannot make him drink from that stream of knowledge.

We have the capacity to engage in constructive discussion, to share ideas, and to evolve our thought processes. If the active community benefits, we all benefit. But it requires us to face the conspiracy of silence in our community first.

The next article will take us into another area of deafening silence - health care.