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ASIA'S FIRST TRAIL RUNNING MAGAZINE July / August 2016

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF THE LONG RUN

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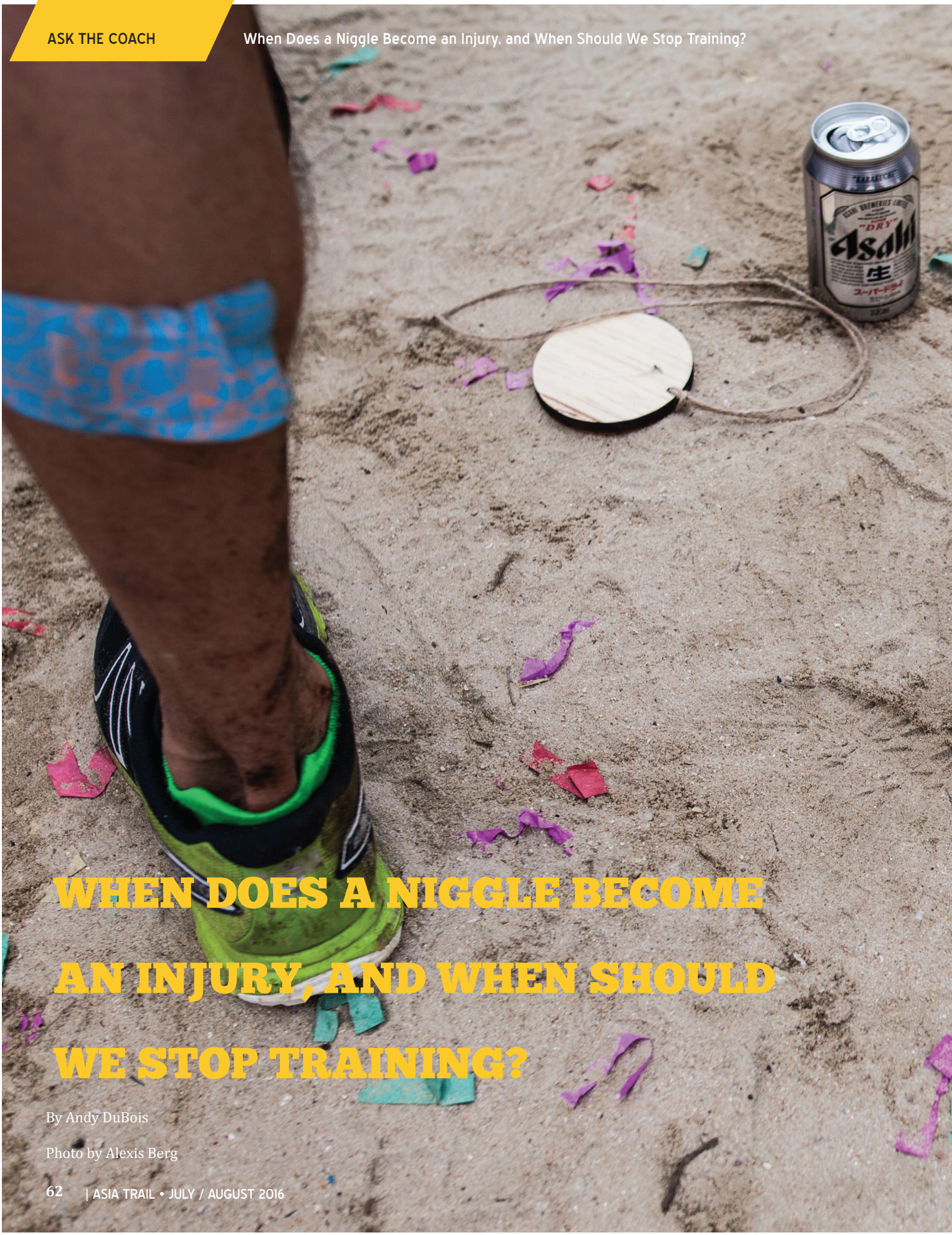

WHEN DOES A NIGGLE BECOME AN INJURY, AND WHEN SHOULD WE STOP TRAINING?

By Andy DuBois

Photo by Alexis Berg

Rather than ignoring it, any minor pain or niggle you experience in training is something to pay attention to. Many make the mistake of disregarding the signs, hoping that they go away, only to find the symptoms becoming significantly worse, eventually leading to weeks of missed training.

The key to keeping your training consistent is knowing when to take a day or two off, when to modify your training, and when you can proceed with caution.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of injuries: chronic and acute.

Acute injuries occur suddenly — for example, a calf strain. One minute you are running along pain-free, next minute 'Ouch!' To let the damaged tissues properly heal, these kinds of injuries require time off. The mistake many make is returning to training too soon. In the case of a calf strain, you should be 100% pain-free walking, doing calf raises, and jumping, before returning to running. If your calf feels tight, then there is still a problem — the tissue isn't fully repaired yet, so don't run. An extra day's worth of recovery can mean the difference between returning to running pain-free versus a repeated cycle of rest, attempted run, and pain that lasts for weeks. Be patient!

Chronic injuries build up over time and are the most-common running injuries — shin splints, iliotibial band pain, Achilles tendinosis, all these are examples of chronic injuries. If you recognise the symptoms early, you can still train by modifying your training. If you continue to ignore the signs, these are the types of injuries that can last for months.

There are four basic rules that can help determine if you should continue or decrease your level of training, or rest from running altogether.

1. If your niggle stays the same as training increases, proceed with caution.

2. If things become worse as you increase training, decrease your training volume.

3. If signs worsen with no increase in training, reduce your training.

4. If your condition becomes more acute even though you have reduced training, then you need time off.

Of course, when it comes to the human body, not everything is all that black and white — so apply the guidelines below with consideration to your particular situation.

If your niggle affects the way you run, then you need to stop running and locate the underlying problem. The cause may be anything from a blister to a stress fracture, but the longer you spend favouring one leg, the more likely you will overload other areas and end up with not only the initial problem but also other compensating injuries. Ideally, seek professional help to determine the issue so you know what training you can safely continue doing.

If however the irritation worsens during specific sessions, or on specific terrain, modify your training. For example, you may only be aware of it when running faster or when running downhill. If that's the case, the first step is to reduce the time spent doing what aggravates the issue. So cut down the hills or speed sessions for a week, or two, and see what this does. A slight reduction may be all you need, allowing your body ample time to adapt.

Next case: You have a niggle that goes away during the warm up and then feels fine for the rest of the run. Proceed with caution and monitor carefully. If you find that the amount of warm-up time it takes for the niggle to go away increases — that's a warning sign that the issue is magnifying, and you will need to reduce your training. Add in a few more rest days, reduce the long run and speed-work, and see if a week or more of easy runs allows it time to recover.

Finally, if you have reduced your training volume and the problem is still not improving, then at this point some time off is probably going to be most beneficial. But rather than just rest, continue working out those activities you can do pain-free, to keep up your fitness levels — you may be able to still ride your bike, use a cross-trainer, hike up and down stairs, all with no pain. This will not only help maintain fitness, but keep your blood flowing to damaged areas and speed up recovery.

Outright rest is often not the solution. Some injuries (particularly tendon-based ones) need load to stimulate repair — too much load and you break down, not enough and recovery time increases. This is why it's always preferable to get a diagnosis from an experienced professional. For instance, a calf strain needs time off, but an Achilles tendon problem, on the other hand, responds better to some load, so a modified training program will work better than complete rest.

Pay attention to niggles and adjust training sooner rather than later — by playing it safe you'll minimise your chances of issues developing into an injury that will completely stop you from running. AT

Andy is an award-winning personal trainer and elite endurance athlete specialising in ultra running. You can find more useful info on his ultra running coach website (www.mile27.com.au).