

ATHLETICS OMNIBUS – SMART WORK VERSUS HARD WORK

From the Athletics Omnibus of Richard Stander, South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

Competition opportunities for athletes have various functions. For many athletes, competition opportunities are provided by Federations to give the average person in the street an opportunity to participate in athletics. For the selected few talented athletes, athletics opportunity will determine who is the champion. These selected few elite athletes capture the imagination of the spectator. Their performances inspire the average person to become involved in athletics. The successful talented athletes are referred to as roll models of the sport.

In an attempt to become one of the selected few athletes honoured with the title as the World Champion or Olympic Games Champion, etc. many strategies are compiled to achieve the set objective. Some of these strategies are based on assumptions that have unsatisfactory outcomes.

One such as assumption is based on the slogan “Excellence consists of 10% talent and 90% hard work”. The slogan suggests that hard will enable the athlete to win a medal at the IAAF World Championships, Olympic Games, etc. This slogan elevates averages to the level of excellence and actively reduces the possibility of excellent performances by the athlete.

Athletes and coaches that use the slogan “Excellence consists of 10% talent and 90% hard work” to motivate them, run the risk of setting objectives according to this average level of thinking.

When the objective is to achieve the ultimate achievement, one should never use “averages” to estimate the limits of excellence. You will drastically underestimate what is possible for the talented athlete.

In practice, hard work can get the athlete to the finals, but smart work will get the athlete on the medal podium. Hard work is not the only factor that will determine if the athlete is successful or not. Many other factors will also contribute to the athlete’s success.

Physiological, psychological, environmental, technical and tactical factors are all important factors in preparing for an event. Ultimately, it will be the human factor that will determine the final outcome of the result on the athletics track.

Tactical preparation can be regarded as smart work and should be a very important component of the athlete’s strategic planning. Tactical preparation should be based on getting the human factor to work in your favour rather than against you.

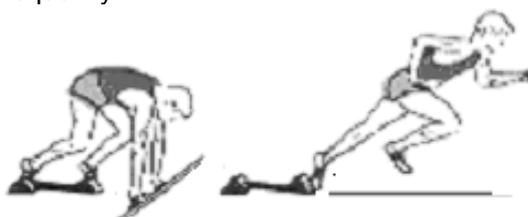
2. GENERAL TACTICS

- 2.1. Skills can be developed, knowledge can be obtained, but talent cannot be taught. You either have it or you don’t. It is important that we find the right athlete first, before preparing them for a championship. The athlete with big match temperament (BMT) is the athlete to find. They have a natural tendency to focus on achieving set objectives. All that needs to be done is the get them to focus on these objectives.
- 2.2. Athletes should know the rules of their event well. “First know the rules before you change the rules”. The capacity to apply rules to favour you own talents, will give you the edge when it is required to improvise during competition.
- 2.3. The shortest route to the medal podium is the route with the least resistance. Taking the route with the least resistance in practice means to intimidate your opposition with your talent, before they can intimidate you, e.g. if you are an extrovert, talk while your opposition is trying to focus; if you can control your emotions, frustrate your opposition during the warm-up sessions; if you are clear of the objective to achieve, cause doubt in the mind of the opposition about their objectives; if your equipment is well designed, create doubt in the mind of the opposition about the quality of their equipment, etc.
- 2.4. Know the environment where the competition will be held and the weather conditions, e.g. is the track surface synthetic, grass or ash. Does the wind blow often? What is the chance of raining or is the air very dry? To reduce the possibility of human error it is advisable that the athlete train on the track, prior to the competition, preferably in similar conditions than on the competition day.
- 2.5. “Play the statistics game”. Know the performance capacity e.g. how fast they can run, are they stronger in the heat than the finals, when do they accelerate in races, which jump/throw in the series is normally the best, etc.

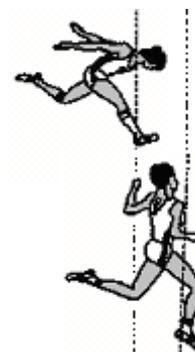
- 2.6. Everybody has both strong and weak points. The opposition will regard their tactics as their strong points. If you know what the main opposition's tactics are, prepare a counter offensive to neutralize their strong point e.g. some athletes like to run in the front of a bundle while disrupting the rhythm of the other athletes running behind them. Forcing this athlete to run in the bundle will neutralize their strong point.
- 2.7. Plan a counter action in advance, but be prepared to change or adapt the plan according to the situation. Never underestimate the opposition, because they too may know your tactics, and work out their own plans accordingly.
- 2.8. Know your own capacity. Listen to your body during competition and know if you have sufficient energy to accelerate or to wait longer.

3. TACTICS FOR SPRINTS, HURDLES AND RELAYS

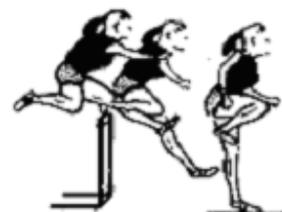
- 3.1. A correct start is important. This will determine the level of concentration of the athlete during the competition. A good start gives you an above average chance to win the race. Your opposition knows this and will attempt to get you to lose your concentration or composure. Keep this in mind in your preparation for the start.
- 3.2. For top athletes, the duration of all events in the sprints is less than 60 seconds. As a result, to recover from a mistake is almost impossible. The preparation strategy should focus frequently in doing things the first time right, e.g. practice starts frequently.
- 3.3. All sprints have to start with starting blocks. Check which type of blocks will be used at the competition and practice with it in advance.



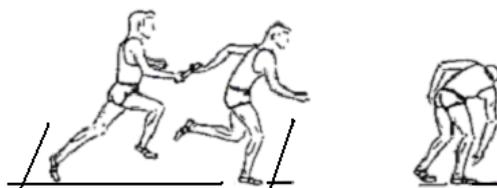
- 3.4. Athletes running in the centre lanes tend to have the advantage during competition. Try to negotiate for the centre lanes in advance.
- 3.5. Check the running surface for any uneven spots, or lines that can lead to confusion during the competition, e.g. a line close to the finish line that can cause the athlete to "dip" over the finish line too early.
- 3.6. During heats, the athlete must check how many athletes in each race go through to the next round, e.g. the winner and 4 fastest times.
- 3.7. Keep in mind that during eliminating rounds at a Championship, the athletes with the fastest times are placed in the centre lanes in the next round.
- 3.8. Athletes should check if the lane draws were done correctly as soon as possible after the draws are made available.
- 3.9. Athletes running in the inside or outside lanes are in a disadvantaged position and should take more time to focus on their race than athletes running in the centre lanes.
- 3.10. Reserve energy for the final during the eliminating rounds by running responsibly without running too slowly.



- 3.11. A headwind will cause an athlete to run shorter strides while a tailwind will cause an athlete to run longer strides. Hurdlers should keep the effect of a headwind or tailwind in mind when approaching a hurdle during competition, e.g. in a headwind, the athlete must drive harder into a headwind; otherwise the athlete will not be able to stride over the approaching hurdle as it will be too far. Likewise if the hurdler runs with a tailwind, the hurdler will run into the next hurdle if no attempt is made to touch down faster after the hurdler is over the existing hurdle.



- 3.12. Hurdlers should check if the hurdles are at the right height or the correct distance apart before going down in the blocks.
- 3.13. Relay athletes must use markers to determine when to start as the incoming athlete approaches.
- 3.14. Relay athletes must check if their markers are still in the right place before the approaching runner is nearing.



- 3.15. Relay athletes must check well in advance if the incoming athlete is in the same lane.
- 3.16. Baby powder, lime stone powder or resin should be placed on the palm and fingers of the hand before the relay start to avoid the baton from slipping out of the hand while running.

4. TACTICS FOR DISTANCE RACES

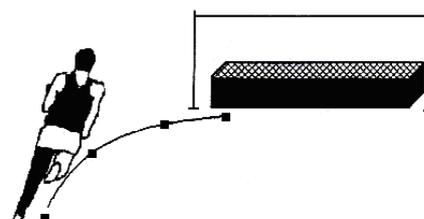
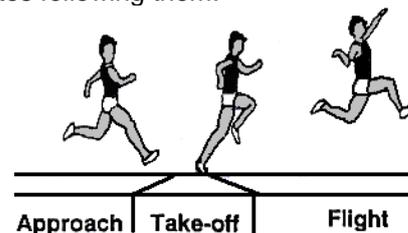
- 4.1. Don't adjust to the race pace of your opposition. You will lose your capacity to surge, when needed.

- 4.2. The athlete should only set the pace if the athlete is used to it. The front runner takes a lot of psychological strain which takes its toll at the end of the race.
- 4.3. In distance races, run in the 2nd – 4th place during the race. This way the front runners will “pull” the runners behind them and will not tire as quickly.
- 4.4. Stay in contact with the front runners. The pace in the middle distance races is very fast. Once contact is broken (more than 10m) you have to rely on your own strength to work your way back. This causes you to tire quickly.
- 4.5. The opposition can be passed around the bend. Maintaining your own rhythm is far more important than the few strides you will run further due to running in the second lane on the bend.
- 4.6. Don't get “boxed” in. When you have athletes all around you, are forced to adapt to their rhythm. When the front runners surge, you will not be able to respond because you have lost your rhythm.
- 4.7. Don't look back unnecessary. Only when you are close to the finish line, this action is justified. Try to look sideways without turning your head. Any movement other than forward movement will cause you to lose rhythm.
- 4.8. Run behind the outside shoulder of the front athlete. This will enable you to pass any time you like.
- 4.9. If the wind is blowing from the front, run behind the other runners to avoid wind resistance, but avoid being “boxed” in.
- 4.10. Pass the opposition during the race at an even pace, because acceleration uses large volumes of energy.
- 4.11. Use only one final attempt. It is advisable to wait for the right moment before accelerating and then maintain acceleration up to the finish line.
- 4.12. Stay relaxed during the race; otherwise too much energy will be used to maintain a pace.
- 4.13. Maintain the final effort until after the finish line. The other athletes are also busy with a final effort and will pass if you slow down prior to the finish line.



5. TACTICS FOR JUMPS AND THROWS

- 5.1. Jumpers and throwers tend to do better when participation in the 2nd half of the round because they have the advantage of capitalizing on the mistakes made of the jumpers and throwers participating before them.
- 5.2. Jumpers and throwers who have to participate first in the competition must focus more on relaxing, as they experience more of the competition stress than the athletes following them.
- 5.3. A headwind will cause the jumpers to run shorter strides during the run-up, while a tailwind will result in running longer strides. Jumpers should keep the effect of a headwind or tailwind in mind during the approach run, e.g. in a headwind, the long jump athlete must move the marker closer to the take-off board. Likewise in a tailwind the marker must be moved further away from the take-off board.
- 5.4. In a tailwind, the approach run will be faster and the maximum controllable speed during take-off might be affected.
- 5.5. A headwind will affect the thrower differently than a tailwind. Athletes should compensate for that in their approach.
- 5.6. Javelin throwers perform better in a tailwind and discus throwers perform better in a headwind. It is important to monitor the direction of the wind during competition and use it to your advantage.
- 5.7. The athlete has the right to change the direction of the approach if done according to the rules. This however can be a strategic attempt of the opposition to get you to lose your concentration.
- 5.8. Jumpers must verify if the length of the run-up area is sufficient. If not, compensate for it during training or the warm-up session.
- 5.9. Jumpers and javelin throwers should always carry a spare marker in their tog bag and take it into the competition area.
- 5.10. Jumpers and javelin throwers must always check if their markers are still in the correct position before attempting the next jump or throw.
- 5.11. Jumpers and throwers must always check if the surface of the competition area is slippery before the competition and request the officials to correct it before the start of the competition.
- 5.12. Throwers must verify if the implement is the correct weight before the competition. The weight and quality of implements vary from competition to competition.
- 5.13. Throwers should always carry a towel in the tog bag. The towel must be used to dry or clean the implement before each attempt.



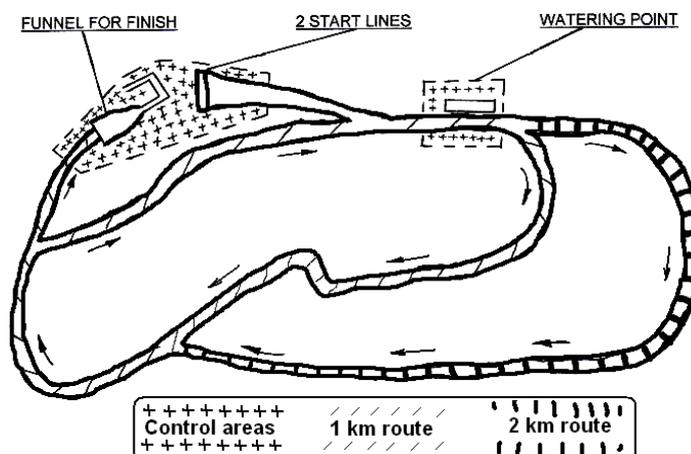
5.14. Baby powder, lime stone powder or resin should be placed on the palm and fingers of the hand before every attempt to get a better grip on the implement.

6. TACTICS FOR CROSS COUNTRY, MOUNTAIN RACES, TRAIL RACES, ETC

- 6.1. Cross-country requires greater strength, skill savvy and psychological resilience than road races. Road running on the other hand, is a better measure of endurance. The training program must make provision for this change of emphasis.
- 6.2. It is important to maintain concentration and not allowing your mind to wander. You must monitor the movements of fellow runners like a hawk, not allowing them to outsmart you.
- 6.3. Before the race, check out the whole course in detail. Pick the best spots to apply your tactics, and note the potential trouble spots e.g. bottlenecks, blind turns, hills, patches of bad footing.
- 6.4. In road racing, it's possible for a runner who knows his or her pace to run a strange course "blind", with considerable success. In cross-country, the outcome is more dependent on how well you've figured out where the main pitfalls and opportunities are likely to occur.
- 6.5. Make sure prior to the race, how many laps will be run. Some courses have only one lap while others can have up to four laps. The more the laps, the more obstacles there will be to keep in mind. Keep close track of the laps, to avoid being caught off guard towards the end of the race.
- 6.6. If you think you have realistic hopes of placing among the leaders at the finish, get out fast at the start. The importance of getting position early is much greater in cross-country than in road races. Most cross-country courses have bottlenecks, sharp turns, funnels into narrow paths, footbridges, etc., that make it impossible for runners following the lead runners to maintain pace. If you get caught behind a crowd in the first 400m, you may never be able to work your way up to the leaders again. Before you have worked your way up to the leaders, another obstacle will cause a change of pace, etc. The leaders will pull further ahead in a relaxed manner while those in "heavy traffic" will fume like rush hour commuters.

6.7. The lengths of cross-country tracks vary. Confirm in advance which distance will be run in the championship and prepare for it in advance. The training program must be adapted to the distance that will be run.

6.8. Although a lot of energy is used to run fast during the 1st kilometre of the race, there is a very good chance of it working out in your favour. While you get some space for open running as a front runner, the pack behind are caught up in obstructions. They have to change rhythm, while you can 'rest'.



EXAMPLE OF A CROSS COUNTRY COURSE LAY-OUT

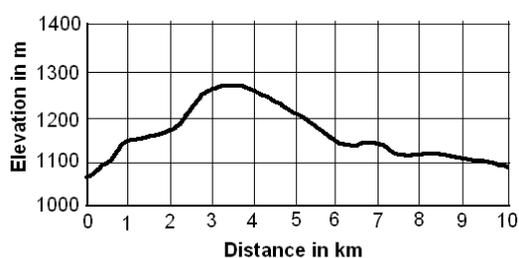
- 6.9. The logic of quick start applies later in the race as well. Despite your best efforts to get free at the start, you might still be in a big traffic jam after the first kilometre. If you see clear sailing a short distance ahead of the crowd, it will pay to surge out of the heavy traffic. The surge will cost, but consider the alternatives. While running in the pack you will spend more energy ducking branches, ducking past bushes, and making little detours with your feet, etc. It is better to spend energy getting free in a decisive burst, so you can concentrate on a relaxed pace in the remainder of the race.
- 6.10. In cross-country you must run against other runners, not against time or an even pace. In road running the runner will ignore other runners and concentrate on a fixed pace. In cross-country, the competition is more personal. Other runners continuously will try to beat you to the next obstacle.
- 6.11. Be prepared to take advantage of the opponent's weakness. In a cross country race between equally conditioned athletes, the winning edge is often a matter of who is best able to perceive and exploit the opponent's vulnerabilities. On a typical cross country course, with it's sudden changes of direction, speed or footing, every competitor will have moments of weakness such as surges of lactic acid, breaks in rhythm, losses of momentum at bottlenecks, etc. The athlete must try to make ground during this moment of weakness. By the time the athlete recovered form the moment of weakness, it will be too late to respond on a challenge made by another athlete...
- 6.12. When your moment of weakness arrives, you must try to hide it as best as possible. One way is to concentrate on deep breathing during the race. Heavy breathing is normally a sign of fatigue. You will benefit from the larger oxygen intake, while the opposition misjudges your moment of weakness. When they try to make a gap, allow yourself to drift back 5 to 10 m in order to preserve

the deception. Meanwhile devote yourself to maintaining contact and nursing your small reserve until the opposition's surge burns out. Then take your time catching up, and keep your pace while passing the opposition. This will break the opposition's confidence.

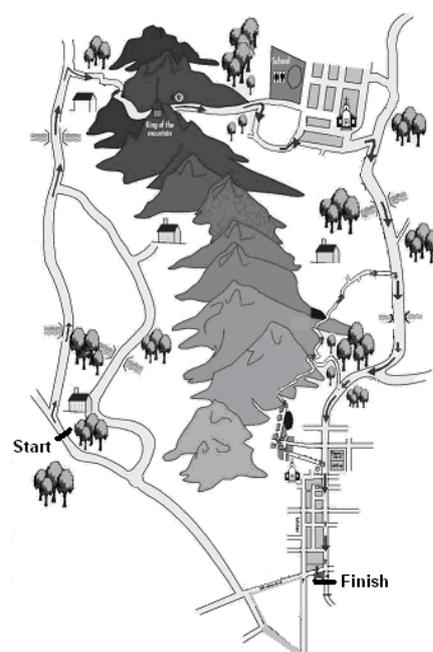
- 6.13. If you have worked hard catching up with someone ahead, pull up to within a few strides, then ease off and tuck in behind until your own breathing has settled down. Then gather yourself together and pass decisively while breathing deeply but as silently as possible. The contrast between the target runner's noisy respiration and your own 'easy' breathing will give the opposition the impression that they has no chance of challenging you, and may safe you the effort of fighting the opposition off.
- 6.14. When you go around a bend or over a hill out off sight of the next runner behind you, run like a thief. Your pursuer will remember how far ahead you were when you disappeared, and will expect to see you the same distance ahead when you reappear in an open area. The extra distance you will have gained during your brief absence will be a psychological body blow to your follower.
- 6.15. As you reach the top of a tough hill, accelerate until well on your way along the flat, or down the other side, before easing off gradually to your pre-hill pace. When you climb a steep grade, there is a natural instinct to slow down sharply once you reach the top. Nine-tenths of the field will yield subconsciously to that instinct. This is prime time for you to make a gap with them. They will probably notice it too late.
- 6.16. A surge on the flat areas presents the same pitfall, and opportunity for exploitation, as a hill. A surge is a show of strength, but the end of a surge may be a moment of weakness. Deliberately slow down, but try to recover gradually from a previous surge without them noticing.
- 6.17. Finally, as you approach the finish, think in terms of strength rather than speed. The finishing stretch is very seldom smooth. Concentrate on running close to the ground, rather than the bouncy effect associated with sprinting on the track. This will ensure you to be able to maintain your fast pace without losing rhythm.

7. TACTICS FOR ROAD RACES

- 7.1. Road races are generally run over much longer distances than track events or cross country and therefore a better measure of straight endurance rather than versatility. The race distances are normally 10km, 15km, 21,1km, 42,2km. The ultra-marathons can be any distance longer than 42,2 km.
- 7.2. Attire during longer races is crucial.
 - 7.2.1. Put baby powder in the shoes to reduce friction between the foot and the shoe.
 - 7.2.2. Wear sunglasses when you are running into the sun.
 - 7.2.3. Wear hats that can 'breath'.
 - 7.2.4. Clothing must fit comfortable. Lose clothing can be very irritating when you are tired.
 - 7.2.5. Wear gloves on cold days to keep blood circulation normal during the race.
 - 7.2.6. Put Vaseline above the eyebrows to avoid the sweat from dropping into the eyes.
 - 7.2.7. Put some toilet paper in a plastic moneybag of the kind used by banks and pin to your pants to be used during necessary number 2 pit stops.
- 7.3. The athlete must make sure prior to the race, where the up hill and down hills areas on the course are, and plan the race pace accordingly.
- 7.4. If there is a steep hill in the race, the pace in the earlier part must be adapted to provide for sufficient energy for the hill. It can be tactically devastating when a steep hill is reached in a race and you did not provide for it in your race planning. Opponents will use this as an opportunity to surge on you, and morally de-motivate you.
- 7.5. Check if the course is in urban areas or in the countryside. In urban areas many people will be next to the road encouraging you, causing you to run faster than your planned pace. In the countryside, you can feel lonely and lose concentration. Try to stick to the bundle during unsafe stages of the race.



TOPOGRAPHIC LAY-OUT OF COURSE



- 7.6. Hundreds, sometimes thousands of athletes start at the same time, which causes a lot of bumping and pushing during the first kilometre. The athlete must try to avoid this by standing in front or on the side of the bunch.
- 7.7. Once a race has started, the runner must get into a race pace as soon as possible. This pace must be trained regularly during training sessions. While running, constantly check your pace by comparing the time on your watch with the markers next to the road indicating the distance covered.
- 7.8. The athlete must ignore the other runners and concentrate on his/her own pace, especially in the 2nd half.
- 7.9. Because of the duration of the race, it is sometimes difficult to concentrate on your own pace for a long period of time.
- 7.10. Find a group of runners running more or less the same pace as you during the early part of the race. This will give you an opportunity to relax. But the pace must still be monitored every time you pass a marker to avoid slowing down.
- 7.11. When a head-on wind is blowing, try to use other runners as a windshield by running behind them, without disturbing your rhythm.
- 7.12. Keep in mind that as you become exhausted, it is even more difficult to concentrate, and the tendency is to forget. It is advisable to write your target times for every kilometre on your hand where it is easily noticeable.
- 7.13. As you become tired, you will have difficulty to see clearly and your brain will respond slower. Look well ahead of the course to see route markers, obstacles, etc. to give you a chance to respond in time.
- 7.14. When passing water points keep your pace while taking water from the helpers. Drink water regularly during the race to avoid dehydration. When you are finish drinking water, don't throw the excess water away. Rather pour it over your head and legs to cool down your head and muscles. This will slow down the feeling of exhaustion.
- 7.15. When running uphill, there is a natural tendency to slow down once you reach the top. As you reach the top of a tough hill, accelerate until well on your way along the flat or down the other side, before easing off gradually to your pre-hill pace. Nine-tenths of the field will yield subconsciously to that instinct of slowing down. This is prime time for you to make a gap between them and you. They will probably notice it too late.
- 7.16. When running in a group, don't run directly behind somebody. Run alongside or next to his/her shoulder. When running behind somebody, it will cause you to adapt to his/her pace without you noticing. When he/she surges, you will not be able to respond, because of the unnatural rhythm you are running.
- 7.17. A surge on the flat presents the same pitfall and opportunity for exploitation as a hill. A surge is a show of strength, but the end of a surge may be a moment of weakness. Deliberately slow down, but gradually, while trying to recover from a previous surge, without them noticing.
- 7.18. If you think you have realistic hopes of placing among the leaders at the finish, get into a position where you can see the front runners at all times. Losing sight of the front runners, especially when you are tired can be very demoralising.
- 7.19. During the later part of the race, the runners will be few and far between. Due to fatigue you will experience negative thoughts very easily. Concentrate on positive experiences during previous races, especially those that you have won.



8. TACTICS FOR RACE WALKING

- 8.1. The strategy for road runners and distance races applies to race walkers as well.
- 8.2. Avoid looking at the feet of the walker in front of you as you will lose your own rhythm in the process.
- 8.3. Race Walking is very technical and very few Technical Officials have sufficient experience to judge the race walker, particularly when the athlete is walking very fast. Avoid losing concentration during competition when you think you are being wrongly warned for breaking the rules.



9. CONCLUSION

It is a given that in any situation, there will always be unknown factors to deal with. The strategy to illuminate as many unknown factors possible before the competition starts is a sound business principle. It is easier to remain focused when dealing with 1 or 2 unknown factors only. The more unknown factors the athlete has to deal with, the more likely it is for the human factor to work against you.

The athlete who plans to be tactical during competition must be energetic, enthusiastic, disciplined and hungry for knowledge in his/her approach. It is important that the athlete remains goal orientated, positive, creative, entrepreneurial, assertive and decisive at all times.

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