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Transitioning Athletes to the Next Level

Put a mental edge in your training and racing.

Have you ever had one of those experiences during a race or training session when your mind just was not going to let you have a good day? Something may have sparked it: your bike was knocked over in T1, your shoes were soaking wet from rain in T2, or maybe you were just having a poor race/training session (not going as fast as you would like on the bike in the wind). Your mind began its litany of “you are such a slow - - - -”, “how could you let that - - - pass you,” “I will never finish,” “this hill is huge.” If your best friend was along for the ride with you and he/she spoke to you like that, wouldn’t you ask them to leave you alone? Wouldn’t you begin to doubt that they actually had your best interest in mind? If they had been talking to you like this all through your training buildup, my guess is you would have told them where to go, and yet we talk to ourselves like this all the time.

Do you get so nervous before or during a race, is it hard to control your intensity, or even to have a good time? Do you lose focus at the most important times in a workout/race? Can you relax before a race? Can you see yourself winning/improving? Is your mind disciplined enough that it can let you actually have a good training session? Can you stay positive and focuses when it is pouring with rain at the race/workout start? Do you want to have better performances at your next race? Improve a certain skill? Then mental training is for you.

Whether you are an elite triathlete or a back of the packer, mental training is a must-have element of your training plan. Whether you plan to race one sprint or 3 Ironman races this year, you have got to incorporate some form of mental training, or your preparation may well leave you short of your goal. Mental training and psychological preparation covers topics such as

- 1) goal setting,
- 2) mental training plans that cover:
 - a) dealing with negative self talk,
 - b) positive imagery and visualization,
 - c) stress reduction,
 - d) concentration.

1) Goal Setting. A goal without a plan is just a dream.

How can you start anything without knowing what the desired result is? This is what goal setting is all about. The goals are both global, for the whole season, and also local, for every training session.

What do goals do? They provide a positive motivational strategy to enhance performance by focusing attention and promoting increased intensity and persistence.

However, if you set the wrong kinds of goals, they can become a major source of stress by becoming standards by which failure and success are defined.

How to set goals to aid your plan, not decimate your training.

- 1) make sure that you focus on performance related goals that are based on learning new skills and improving your performance. This improvement must not be attached to anyone else, and should be self referenced.
- 2) Set progressive short term goals that lead to your long term goals.

Global Goal Setting—the overall objective.

Say you want to complete your first sprint or half ironman in May/November , then you use this goal to prescribe your local/short term goals. For example: I must use an 8 week run walk plan to get up to running a full 5k; I must complete my base training and its emphasis on form drills, etc. in order to ride for 3 hours without bonking.

Then, each workout is associated with a particular goal:

Swim: complete certain drills to increase rotation in the water;

Bike: increase cadence without bouncing in the saddle and ride for 90 minutes with my appropriate HR;

Run, increased lactate tolerance by working to stay in the appropriate HR for my tempo run.

These short term goals allow increased opportunities for success, corrected effort levels, and modified strategies.

- 3) Goals must include a target date for completion and a plan of how to accomplish that. E.g.: 8 week run walk plan, hill sessions, swim drills, long rides and runs, bricks, etc
- 4) Goals must be recorded and monitored weekly and daily. HR levels, feel, etc.
- 5) They should be reinforced and supported. How did you do? If you accomplished your goals, give yourself the appropriate kudos. If not, evaluate why.
- 6) Set a few specific goals that are prioritized. What is your greatest weakness in each discipline? How can you address it?
- 7) Set difficult goals that are challenging, yet achievable. It needs to be out of reach right now, but with a reasonable stretch can be achieve. Too easy . . .you won't be motivated to do it. Too hard... you will feel defeated and negative.
- 8) Goals must be objective and measurable: decreased Hr for a given pace, increased speed over a given distance and conditions, increased strength, etc.
- 9) Goals should be individualized and not team oriented, as you have less control over this.
- 10) State goals in a positive manner.
- 11) Set goals that are meaningful to you.

Common mistakes when writing goals

- Too many: limit it to 2-3 season goals and 2-3 short term goals for each training phase, one goal for each training sessions
- They are written in too general terms and are not measurable.

- There is a failure to support them, with plans, with lifestyle, with . . .
- Failure to modify unreasonable goals.
- Failure to monitor and evaluate.
- Setting of outcome goals vs. performance goals. Outcome = I must place at my first race vs Performance goal: stay on pace using my HR to regulate. The performance goal will help you reach the outcome goal and is under your control. The outcome goal will depend on many things (like all 3 state champions showing up to your first race—chances are, you won't place . . .)

2) Mental Training plans

This is your plan of action for your mind. You have different types of training for different areas of physiological fitness, so you need different types of psychological training as well. Just like your physical training, you need to know when you will do this, why you are doing it, and then you have to practice it.

a) How do you deal with negative Self talk?

Right now, think of 3 things you tend to say to yourself that are negative.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are three things you could say that would be more useful?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

For example:

If you are running slower than you would like to, try, “I am getting faster with every quality run session.”

If your swim stroke feels off today: “I will continue to work on improving my stroke and I am focused completely on the task at hand.”

If you are having trouble keeping up with the pack on the group ride? I will focus on form, cadence, and a positive attitude.”

Always state these in the positive.

When should you do this? Every training session and every time you notice yourself being negative.

Why? Because no one can perform at their best when they are being talked to in a negative way and having their efforts undermined. Positive self-talk helps to build confidence, and calm your nerves.

b) Positive Imagery and visualization.

This technique can help you improve a particular skill, control tension, and increase relaxation prior to a competition.

1) First come up with a happy/positive image you are really familiar with. (running on the beach in the Islands, riding your bike as a kidFigure out *how* it is that you see what you see in your mind. When conjuring up an image in your mind do you perceive the image by sight, sound, touch, or feel? All three? Write it down now.

2) Develop vivid images of the event you are working with. Running smooth and fast, crossing the finish line fresh and happy, biking relaxed but powerful. Come up with your own very positive image.

Let's try one now with something unthreatening: your next race site weeks before the competition. Sit quietly and imagine that you are at your next race event all alone; notice how it smells, what the lighting is, how peaceful it is, what the temperature is, how the ground feels under your feet.

Now fill it with people who are all cheering for you. It's competition day and it feels like a festival: now what do you notice, smell, see, feel? What's your HR doing? Perspiration and breathing?

Now imagine you are actually racing and pick the first skill you perform. Notice how your muscles feel as you get ready to execute it, feel the tension and excitement, notice your breathing. Do the first thing over and over in your mind so that you have a complete picture of every aspect of it: your swim stroke, body rotation, catch and pull, the kick, etc.. Starting the run, or beginning the bike crit.

Take that same skill and imagine you are flawless in your execution, your body flows perfectly. Imagine the whole picture, from smells and sights, to how the water feels moving over your body as you execute each stroke perfectly.

3) Next you can use this technique to correct errors:

Take the same scene and if you notice that an error has snuck in, slow down the videotape in your head, rewind it and go back and correct it: poor arm recovery on your swim stroke; get that elbow high; mashing the gears on your bike on a hill; smooth out your pedal stroke and feel a smooth turnover; over-striding on the run; shorten your step and feel the increase in speed and reduction of effort. Remember to make each scene as vivid as possible-see yourself there and see yourself making the appropriate corrections and flowing smoothly through the scene.

When would you use this skill? As often as possible! Try it in every workout.

Why would you use this skill? Imagery and visualization are powerful tools for building confidence, focusing attention and calming you down, and can be used anywhere. I often use them prior to a race or as I am training to calm me down. The more you practice, the better, just like any other skill. It really does work to smooth out problems in technique, so try it on your own at least twice a week, and watch how it helps your training session.

c) **Stress reduction and Relaxation -- Breathing exercises**

Monitoring your breathing before an event is a great way to calm your nerves, and should be part of your pre-race routine. You need full and open breathing to perform at your best and to clear your mind.

With each inhalation, you should feel a sense of relaxation and with each exhalation focus on letting go of any tension in the body.

Here's an exercise by Dr. Dorothy Harris (psych prof. at Penn State.) that will help you improve your breathing technique.

- 1) Imagine that your lungs have 3 parts, a lower, a middle, and an upper section. Close your eyes and imagine that you are just going to fill up the bottom/lower 1/3 of your lungs as you breathe in. Do this by imagining that you are pushing out your diaphragm, stretching it to its max, and then opening up your abdomen.
- 2) Next, imagine filling the 2nd third of your lungs by expanding your chest cavity and raising your rib cage and chest to their maximum capacity.
- 3) Finally, fill the last sector of your lungs by raising your chest and shoulders.

Do all three stages over and over again with a soft, smooth motion-no forcing it.

With each exhalation, remember to pull in your abdomen so that all the air comes out of your lungs, and *imagine it taking all the tension with it.*

Build this practice to 30-40 deep breaths a day, and before a race. Do it as a break from work, at your desk, getting ready for bed, stuck in a traffic jam, listening to music.

Mantra meditation

- Find a quiet, comfortable environment, where you are unlikely to be disturbed.
- Think of a mantra, a word or simple phrase that will not arouse you, but will let you stay calm and relaxed and focused on a single task. (for example: "flow", "zone", "ease," "peace.")
- Repeat the mantra with every exhalation (using your the breathing technique you just learnt). When your mind wanders, don't fight it or berate yourself, just slowly bring yourself back to your breath and the mantra.
- Let the relaxation happen, don't try to push it. If negative thoughts enter your mind just "watch "them pass, and return to the breath.

Give yourself a schedule for this. How many times a week will you do it? Start with an easy and doable amount: once or twice a week for 10 minutes and gradually build it up to between 20-30 minutes a day.

The mantra works really well when training and racing also: it helps take your mind off discomfort or negative thoughts, yet still helps you stay on task, focus on your breath, and keep a rhythm. It has helped me through many a tough part of racing.

The beach

Another technique for calming yourself when you are experiencing negative emotions: Using your deep breathing, imagine you are at the beach and visualize the sights and sounds and smells and light of the location.

Next, imagine the word "stress", "anxiety," "fear," (or whatever particular emotion you are experiencing right now) is written in the sand right at the water's edge. With every inhalation, imagine the water lapping over the sand where the word is written, and with every exhalation

imagine the water moving out again and leaving the sand clear, having washed away that negative sensation.

You can actually use the sound of your breath to mimic the sound of the water. This can be used pre-race or actually during the competition.

100

This is great for when you are having a tough time during training and racing. It helps to keep negative thoughts out of your head, take your mind off pain, yet still let me focus on the task at hand. You will also find it helps with your rhythm.

Very simple: with every out-breath, count until you reach one hundred: out-breath “1”, out-breath “2.” If you lose count, simply start again.

Come up with your own

I have clients that say over and over again: “piece of cake”, or “fast, fluid, fresh,” “relax, and let it happen,” “steady and smooth”. What works for you?

When do you practice these techniques?

Positive self talk: at every opportunity and during every training session.

Imagery and visualization: at least once a week, before a race, whenever I think of it.

Stress reduction and relaxation: daily, during workouts, before and during a race.

Why do we practice these exercises?

To focus, to relax, to improve the ability to perform under stress, to maintain as much control of the event as possible, to help deal with nasty surprises, oh yeah and to generally improve your quality of life.

d) Concentration

There are so many things during a race, or even in training that can destroy our concentration: travel hassles, too many people at the gym, a messy transition area, problems with the bike. This can really mess with your mental approach to the race, and undercut your ability to concentrate. (We can avoid some distractions on race day by being really organized before the race: having all your gear checked out, getting to the race site early, knowing the course ahead of time, using imagery and visualization to imagine the race going smoothly.)

Whatever the event, you will be nervous and excited on race day. So how do you calm and ready yourself for the race, apart from using the relaxation methods describes above? Establish a ritual. Some people need to get themselves ready by actually increasing their arousal, and some need to calm themselves—we are all different, but know which type you are and plan for it.

Rituals

Make your ritual simple—not so convoluted that it can actually be stress inducing and concentration breaking if you can’t get it all done—make sure it is reasonable in every situation and what other people are doing can have no effect on it.

Do you need a lucky charm, to sit quietly by yourself with your personal stereo on,
Or . . .?

Other things that should be ritualistic before a race are: when you get up to eat breakfast, what you eat for breakfast, how you set up your transition area, and your pre-race warm-up.

If you don't know what your pre-race ritual is (because you have never raced or never thought of it), follow these steps.

- 1) begin with some breathing exercises.
- 2) do a short imagery and visualization session with familiar scenes and successful events.
- 3) use positive self talk: remind yourself you have trained well, you are really fit, you have great form and you are ready to go.
- 4) Remind yourself of your personal mantra that is your cue for you to do your best.

Use your breathing exercises.

To increase concentration before an event, many athletes do not talk to many people, as this can get you all wired up and decreases your ability to complete your pre-race ritual and breathing exercises. For some the distractions prior to a race are just too much stimulation. Of course, don't get too serious before your event, or you may forget why you are doing it. Are you racing for glory or for fun? The answer will dictate a lot of what you need to do before the race. But you need to know ahead of time what you are going to do so you can calm your mind, organize yourself, and have the best race of your life—every time.

(almost all of the above was taken and adapted from S. Ungerleider's, Mental Training for Peak Performance)

Some things for you to think about as you practice your mental training skills.

Characteristics of Peak Performance

1. a lack of fear
2. no conscious thinking about the performance- “on automatic pilot”
3. total immersion in the activity: “100% in the present”
4. focused concentration and “staying in the moment”
5. feeling relaxed and spontaneous
6. effortless performance—not forcing it
7. feelings of being totally in control of your performance
8. being determined and motivated
9. feeling confident
10. having controlled intensity
11. having a passion for the activity

Elements of excellence that champions practice

1. quality daily practice
2. specific (daily) goals
3. daily imagery practice
4. 100% commitment to excellence
5. 100 % focus in the moment
6. simulation training
7. mental preparation for stress management
8. distraction control strategies
9. accurate self perception of abilities
10. post-competition evaluation

Which psychological skills training elements do the champions value the most?

1. concentration
2. competitive stress control
3. pre-competition mental preparation
4. individual motivation
5. goal setting
6. positive attitude
7. mental toughness
8. emotional control

Psychological blocks to peak performance

- lack of confidence
- negative self-talk
- anxiety
- fears

Taken from the USAT Coaching Manual, Sport Psychology, by Matt Haugen, USAT National Coach.

You are in control of your mind, so make it work for you.