

*Endurance Athletes and the Benefits of Mental Training: Some Basic Fundamentals to Consider Incorporating into Training Plans Part I**

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If coaches and athletes do not place emphasis on the psychological or mental aspects of training and competing, then certainly performances will often fall short of their potential.

This two part article series is intended to help athletes and coaches realize more optimal performances by unleashing the power of the athlete's mind. It is not only imperative for both athletes and coaches to realize the importance of the psychological aspects inherent to their sport, but to actually follow through and incorporate mental training into weekly training schedules to determine what techniques prove most effective. By doing so, one can be assured of a few things. First, you can be assured that you will have to sacrifice some physical training time in order to accommodate this new training regimen. Brewer argues, *"Rather than simply engaging athletes in physical practice and hoping that they will pick up the requisite psychological skills along the way, coaches can adopt a proactive stance in which they actively help athletes acquire and maintain sport-specific psychological skills (Brewer, 2000)."* Second, you should be prepared that some athletes may be hesitant to replace physical training with mental training. Lastly, you should feel confident that those athletes who fully embrace and incorporate mental training into their daily lives, are less likely to be debilitated by pressures and competitive anxiety, trained to release excess tension caused by stress,

and more likely be relaxed. Ultimately, this will facilitate competing more effectively in the future.

First, let us explore imagery, which is often referred to as visualization, mental rehearsal, or mental practice. Imagery provides familiarity with tasks and positive feedback of an athlete's imagined performance (Hardy et al., 1996). Through the use of imagery, athletes can see correct technical and tactical performance execution, generate positive emotions, and *"help athletes prime their focus and intensity to competitive levels (Hale et al., 2005)."* Athletes and coaches usually associate imagery with competition preparation; however, just as important, is using it for skill development in the form of technique correction or adjustment to improve performance. Athletes with solid technique can visualize themselves performing proper technique, while others with less proficiency can improve by learning to visualize proper technique. Subsequent physical training will then ultimately be more effective – as cognitive images of proper technique are transferable into actual execution. This neuromuscular *"transformation"* is made possible through the use of mental imagery. Research has proven that imagery is effective with collegiate athletes of all sports, and results have indicated significant performance improvements for those who incorporated imagery into their training (Lohr & Scogin, 1998).

Additionally, imagery can be effective as a feature of skill learning and in the more general area of behavior modification (i.e. reducing anxiety levels). Not only can imagery aide in reducing stress and facilitate relaxation, but has also been reported to reduce the potential for injury, facilitate the healing process of injured athletes, increase

adherence to rehabilitation, maintain skill or technique during rehabilitation, and even block “replay” visions and thought processes from the injury event (Jones & Stuth, 1997). Other research has indicated, *“Imagery involving perfect execution, as opposed to imagining errors or sloppy performances, is associated with short-term performance improvements, such as those achieved in one day or in the period before contests (Burhans et al., 1988).”* With this in mind, one can see why imagery has become the hallmark of successful sports programs at various levels. This coincides with the premise of knowing yourself/your individual athlete, how competition is perceived, and how best to prepare for the psychological as well as physical demands of the sport. A coach should first use personal observations, feedback, tests, and questionnaires (as a guide) in order to determine how their athletes perceive competition, as well as where and how they focus their thoughts and energies to perform within a given competitive environment.

To establish a foundation for a mental training program, below are some components or aspects to consider. To aid in determining what techniques and or focus areas, guide your approaches based upon what are widely considered the four fundamental C’s of competition – those being *concentration, control, confidence, and commitment*. As an athlete/coach, you want to be able to improve the level of *concentration* (competitive focus), ability to *control* actions/responses to stimuli such as the competitive environment, *confidence* in mental abilities just as much as physical abilities, and *commitment* to make mental training a part of your routine lifestyle. Associated with *concentration*, consider allotting time or attending to:

- identifying Attentional Styles (what you focus on/attend to)
- tailor strategies towards improving event specific Attentional Focus
- incorporate pre-season races into pre-season training schedules, then use them as developmental research tools to help identify state anxiety issues, and build strategies to improve relaxation, confidence, and Attentional Focus
- incorporate mental training time into weekly training/schedules
- through repetitive actions such as practice and dialog, make mental training a part of a routine “lifestyle change”
- learn the importance of Negative Thought Stopping (See Key Components Section in Part II of this series) for training, competing, and the stresses of daily life

Associated with *control*, consider:

- learn what aspects are “controllable” (things you can influence) such as mental race preparations and those that are “uncontrollable” (beyond your ability to influence) such as the weather conditions on race day
- coinciding with concentration above, reminding yourself that you are in control, and by using Negative Thought Stopping techniques, one can re-gain control, focus, and momentum...etc.
- practice control in your mental imagery sessions by acknowledging that negative or faulty technique images will often be visualized during a training session, and recognize the importance to regain control, “rewind the tape”, and visualize the moment again with correct form

- teach yourself to use Attentional Cue Words such as “smooth even pedal stroke”, “rotate hips”, “relax shoulders and elbows”,... to regain or maintain control when technique falters, terrain changes, or when focus drifts

Associated with *confidence*, consider:

- establish realistic challenging goals, goals which breed confidence and facilitate progress towards culminating goals
- clearly identify goals or objectives for training each day
- reinforce positive summaries of weekly training successfully completed – as it boosts confidence as you build towards competitions
- reinforce positive thoughts – perhaps capitalizing on recent successful performances, training sessions, preparation... “I’ve improved dramatically in the last X weeks”, “I’m ready”, “I’ve been preparing for this day, looking forward to it, now it’s time – my time”...
- incorporate pre-season races into your training schedule
- develop self-efficacy (power, capacity, and belief in your effectiveness)
- utilize imagery training to visualize defeating higher-ranked competitors

Associated with *commitment*, consider:

- positive and negative effects from teammates, team dynamics...(if applicable)
- [for coaches/athletes] ensure that daily training goals, expectations, and responsibilities are clearly defined and understood
- [for coaches] maintain fair, firm, and equal accountability

- occasionally choose an alternate or fun exercise regimen (e.g. on a recovery day) to avoid training boredom
- highlight and post progress (i.e. improving times, performance achievements) throughout the season, and place in a consistently visible area
- try to create some fun and friendly competition on occasion amongst teammates or training partners as 24/7 seriousness will adversely affect commitment over the long term
- performance anxiety; ensure you incorporate steps/techniques to mitigate it, otherwise, it will affect commitment level
- coach-athlete/athlete-coach rapport – they're critical to commitment
- when injured and appropriate, have alternate training (i.e. swim, water running, walk...)

For many athletes, once at the race site, they'll start to stress and anxiety builds as they look around at the other competitors. A critical point must be made to yourself/your athletes, that being, those present at the race is as uncontrollable as the weather, and you must not waste energy thinking about it. Athletes must remind themselves that they can control how they feel and where their focus is. Karen Smyers, former Triathlon World Ironman Champion, Pan American Champion, and World Cup Champion, was quoted stating, *"I understand I can control only how I perform, not how others perform. Competition is a positive force, not a negative one, and you cannot control who is showing up for the event either (Evans, 1997)."* Furthermore, as Hill reiterates, *"Obtaining control includes knowing what aspects of the performance are*

“controllable” and what aspects must be “let go” (Hill, 2001).” Therefore, it is prudent for a coach to repeatedly remind his/her athletes about their ability to control their situation, and to let go or shift focus away from those aspects out of their control. Moreover, “Athletes who exhibit internal control tend to believe their behaviors influence outcomes. Those who exhibit external control tend to attribute their outcomes to outside forces such as fate, chance, and other people (Cox, 1998).”

To summarize, concentrate on what you can control and ignore influences that you cannot. In essence, this is improving your Attentional Focus/Style. In addition, imagery can greatly assist in mentally rehearsing race day feelings and emotions. Through this process, athletes can visualize themselves successfully coping through the entire process – from arrival, to warm-up around competitors, to the start line, to the actual competition itself. It is important for athletes/coaches to think through and discuss the entire range of stress inducing aspects that are normally experienced. Some athletes may have a tendency to experience elevated state anxiety levels due to certain race venues, climate, weather conditions...etc., and therefore may benefit from a checklist of reminders. That’s right, many benefit from just being reminded to take some deep breaths and relax. Remember, every competitor has to race in the same conditions. The important point is not to limit mental imagery to “only seeing yourself swimming, cycling, or running”. Imagery sessions during race week can focus on various areas of the upcoming competition, not to mention alleviate other stresses during race week as well.

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