

The Power of Positive Thought

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Can your mind make you a better runner?

"Marathon running, the toughest of all sports, is all in the mind" - Chris Brasher

In his book *Psyching for Sport*, Terry Orlick, the renowned Canadian sports psychologist, listed four all-important factors for a successful sport performance. These are:

- **Talent** - It pays to pick the right parents
- **Hard work** - Top competitors train harder, and smarter, than "also rans"
- **Simulation or Competition Experience** - To be really successful you need to be out there, participating in the best competition you can find
- **Psyche** - Successful athletes have superior mental skills.

Top competitors have superior mental skills - as well as training harder!

Nowadays the use of sports science, including sports psychology, is acknowledged as being an essential component in the preparation of top athletes. All British Olympic squads now have access to sport psychology support and many teams take their sport psychologist to major championships and training camps. However, despite this top-level acceptance of its benefits, many runners and their coaches have given sports psychology a somewhat lukewarm reception.

If you probe below the surface you will find that many people are already using mental skills or employing psychological strategies which they have developed for themselves as an aid to a better performance. For example, I don't imagine for a moment that I am the only person who in a race focuses on the back of the person in front and allows themselves to be 'towed along' as if connected by an invisible line. Once in the rhythm, and feeling more confident, I can then allow myself to be 'reeled in' closer and closer until I reach a point where I feel ready to overtake and then visually reconnect with the back of next runner up ahead.

Highlighting some of the areas recognised as factors in the outcome of competition, experienced runners have listed the following as important:

- The ability to relax and control anxiety
- Being self-confident
- The capacity to concentrate on the present
- The use of imagery
- Developing determination and tough-mindedness

Although for many people these skills may be considered as 'intuitive', for others these things may not come so naturally. Therefore a little bit of help and guidance may be useful.

Mental skills and psychological techniques

Four basic mental skills which may be employed separately or combined:

1. Goal setting
2. Psycho-regulation
3. Mental imagery
4. Self-talk

All of these are worth thinking about and each of them can be developed with practise to help improve your running performances.

1. Goal-setting

"By having a definite plan to follow you feel that each ten-mile run through the rain is a specific piece of a jigsaw, not just another run" - Brendan Foster.
(Butler, 1998)

Goal setting can be defined as what the athlete is trying to do. It is a process that if used correctly, will have a number of beneficial effects upon an athlete's performance. Research in this area suggests that goal setting enhances motivation and commitment, can help to improve self-confidence and give direction in both training and competition.

To be most effective goal setting needs to be formulated according to SMART principles:

Specific - Identify your target for improvement as precisely as possible. For example, 'Improve my ability to refocus after distraction particularly at the start of a race, and mentally get back on track.'

Measurable - This will enable you to monitor your progress. One way of measuring your progress in mental skills is using techniques such as Performance Profiling (Butler, 1998) or the Mental Skills Questionnaire (Bull, 1996).

Adjustable - Training and performance are dynamic processes with many factors acting upon them. So be prepared to be flexible, to either 'roll with the punches' or 'go with the flow'.

Realistic - Set goals that are sufficiently challenging but still achievable. They need to be sufficiently beyond your current ability to make you work hard, but not so difficult that the probability of you reaching them is dishearteningly low.

Time based - To work properly you will need to identify a point in time by when the target will be reached.

As well as SMART principles there are number of different types of goals. Some of them can be problematic.

Dream goals: These are the thoughts of climbing onto the winners' rostrum, getting onto a national squad, completing just one marathon... Dream goals keep you going through cold dark nights in December, when there seem to be few short term rewards in view, and just weeks and weeks of training up ahead.

Outcome goals: Can be problematic. Some of you may need to think about (and then find it difficult to accept), the fact that you are not in control of winning! The result of a race will depend upon who turns up to do it. Even breaking a World Record is not a guarantee that you will be emerging as number one!

Performance goals: Are a much better proposition. After all, you are the only one in control of your own performance. As far as runners are concerned performance is objectively measurable. Luckily for us, there are no points for 'artistic impression' to muddy the waters.

2. Psycho-regulation

Psycho regulation is the ability to monitor and keep levels arousal 'just right' - not too little, not too much. This can be very important, both in the time before a race, as well as during the actual competition.

For most athletes too much arousal can be experienced as stressful and anxiety provoking, especially when linked to negative thoughts, tension and bodily reactions all of which can undermine 'good

form'. Continuing or chronic over-arousal can lead to soreness of the muscles, lost fluidity of movement and form, and may result in distraction from the correct focus and a breakdown - sometimes catastrophic - in performance.

On the other hand, heightened arousal, interpreted in terms of positive thoughts, for example eagerness and positive anticipation regarding a forthcoming competition, can turn the threat and anxiety into an opportunity to perform and run really well. This kind of positive mind-set can then lead to increased ability to find and maintain concentration and focus and clarity of thinking which makes even the most challenging goal an achievable target.

Learning to control your level of arousal and finding the optimum to suit your own circumstances and performance can be a relatively straightforward process. Methods you might try include:

- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Controlled breathing
- Imaginal skills
- Meditation
- Autogenics
- Self-hypnosis

One of the best ways to learn psycho-regulation is to make, or to acquire, a suitable pre-recorded audiotape. This can then be used to guide you through a relaxation exercise and can be practised until you are able to wind down and take control of your level of mental and physiological arousal at will.

3. Mental imagery

One of the greatest exponents of the use of mental imagery was the athlete David Hemery. Describing his mental preparation before the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, in which he won the Gold Medal and set a new World record in the 400m hurdles, Hemery records how each evening in the two weeks prior to the competition he had gone out to the track and as he walked around had visualised himself running the race. In his mind's eye he ran the race against all of the other competitors he felt might make it to the finals. He had also mentally practised running the race from all of the eight lanes. He was aware that if he was to win the race he would probably have to do so at World Record pace, so each time he mentally rehearsed not only did he see himself winning, but also in a record breaking time.

Use mental imagery on training runs

There is no doubt that mental practice of this kind can be very effective but visualisation and imaging can also be used in many other contexts. For example, mental imagery can be used to produce relaxation, to practise skills and set pieces, to help overcome phobias, to practice 'what-ifs' and to solve problems. As many people will remind you, it's not practice that makes perfect but only perfect practice that makes perfect. Mental rehearsal is a good way of ensuring that is always the case!

4. Self-talk

Self-talk or the inner dialogue which goes on continually inside our heads: when you hear someone discussing the fact that they talked themselves into doing something or 'to be sensible' and not to fall into temptation or whatever, you can be sure that a lively episode of self-talk has recently been carried out. Cognitive psychologists will tell you that what you say to yourself in your head will determine the way you feel and then directly the way you may then act or behave. Talking to yourself can put you into the right kind of positive mood that allows you to behave confidently and to relax, to get into form and to stay there. Equally easily, when stressed or tired, you can undermine this self-same confidence, create anxiety, increased tension and loss of form. What you say to yourself, positive or negative, is usually what you are going to get!

As has been experienced time and time again, putting together positive self-talk and positive mental imagery about what you want to feel and how you want to respond, is a skill that can be consciously

used to improve performance, increase confidence and enhance commitment and focus to even the most challenging task. Breaking out of old habits where you have seen yourself as never quite making it in competition or feeling continual disappointment with the way you train, can both be improved by tackling the conversation inside your head and changing it, along with the mental pictures, into something altogether more positive.

Game plans

The basic mental skills outlined above come into their own when combined into what athletes may find as one of the most practical and useful tools for competition that sport psychology has on offer namely the Game Plan. The Game Plan provides a recipe for competition that if executed correctly leads the athlete into a top performance. Probably the most powerful and effective aspect of the Game Plan is the way in that focuses the runner's attention onto what ever is most relevant at every step of the race. There are eight key aspects to Game Planning all of which need to be thought about and put in place prior to the race or competition.

Before setting up your Game Plan you will need specific goal for the race and its outcome; e.g. a come back race after a long lay off because of injury; a qualifying time for inclusion in a national team or squad. Every race needs a specific goal of its own.

1. Segment the race into naturally occurring phases, each with its own natural breakpoints and own goals. For example: For a 10K event this might be: warm-up phase; start and first kilometre; middle seven or eight kilometres, last 2 kilometres, final 500m, etc. Reason - to maintain motivation and to know what to do next.

2. Customise the Game Plan for the particular race you are going to do. This will allow you to maximise both your form and efficiency.

3. Use positive self-talk in order to maintain effort. Use self-talk to encourage yourself - 'This is the opportunity you've been waiting for', 'You know you can do it'; to control your effort 'Maybe it is hard, but focus on your form and staying in the present' or give yourself a mental pat on the back. Positive self-talk will help keep you going.

4. Mood words - to set the mood and character of the performance; for example 'Calm and cool' or 'Stay strong and tough.'

5. Plan a strategy for the start, including a final mental and physical warm-up and getting into the opening phase of the race. This gets you off to a good, assertive start and puts you in control.

6. Develop a strategy for when things go wrong by pre-empting problems and resolving 'what-if' scenarios? Practice spotting distractions before they have had a chance to damage your performance and plan out a back-to-basics strategy for dealing with 'dead spots' when your mind goes blank and you feel you can't remember what to do next.

7. Mental intensification - for the times when you need to really get tough with yourself and hang in through a rough patch. To do this THINK BIGGER! THINK FASTER! THINK LOUDER!

8. Debriefing - allows you to learn from your performance, what was good and you want to do again, what still needs working on and what you need to change next time.