

WINNING THE MIND GAME

By Leif H. Smith, Psy.D.

Henry Ford may not have been thinking about sweating through a marathon or hammering through a gnarly rock bed on two wheels when he said, “Whether you think you can or can’t, you’re usually right,” but the axiom speaks volumes about sports.

Self-confidence and strength of mind are often what sets good athletes apart from great ones. But mental training is not only for the elite – a well-developed mental muscle will help everyone from weekend warriors to wannabe pros push beyond plateaus and reach heights previously thought unattainable.

Practicing these mental skills will help you establish a foundation for success in any sport:

VISUALIZATION Studies show that the human mind has difficulty separating reality from imagined reality. If you’ve ever had a dream that felt “so real,” you understand. Visualization helps us imagine real situations and prepare ourselves to meet them head on. While it may sound like New Age doctrine, visualization is really just focused daydreaming that’s goal-oriented.

Visualization takes practice, but is an important component of mental training. To improve your ability to visualize, do the following:

Set aside 10 minutes each morning and evening to practice (this also helps you begin and end each day relaxed).

Close your eyes, and choose a desired outcome (running three miles at a nine-minute pace, for instance). Play this outcome in your mind, much as you would replay a favorite memory.

Incorporate as many senses as you can. Hear your rhythmic breath. Feel the sweat on the back of your neck. Smell the warm summer air, and feel a cool breeze on your skin. Listen to crowds and family members cheering your name. See the finish line.

Stay positive. Always picture yourself succeeding, and doing so easily.

Replay these thoughts during training and racing to carry you through the tough spots.

SELECTIVE RECALL Confidence in sports requires selective memory. This means giving past successes more weight than failures. Any “failures” should be reframed as learning experiences on a path to ultimate success.

Relive your past victories, recalling them as you would a fond childhood memory, and allow yourself to experience the joy and satisfaction over again.

Another approach is to picture yourself having a mental bank account in which you make numerous deposits (positive memories) and seldom make withdrawals (negative feelings). You can bank positive emotions and experiences for use when your confidence needs an extra boost. Work to create a surplus in your account and you’ll be rich in positive energy.

RESILIENCY The ability to bounce back from adversity is key. This may mean coming back strong after a tough race, a nagging injury or a bad training day. Do the following to increase your resiliency:

Focus on lessons learned. If you’re unhappy with an outcome, focus on what you learned from the experience and accept it as a gift of greater wisdom.

Look on the bright side. Seeing the glass half full breeds hope and created opportunity. When you find yourself focusing on what’s wrong, remind yourself of all that’s right.

Anticipate obstacles. Accepting that things won’t always be easy helps you roll with the punches and keep moving forward. Remember, the obstacles make the victories sweeter.

ENERGY MANAGEMENT Realize there’s an optimum level of energy output for peak performance in any sport. This output is sport specific – running requires a different energy level than walking, which requires a different energy level than mountain biking. Managing and optimizing this energy is key to keeping your mind strong. To optimize your energy levels, do the following:

Consider the energy demands – both physical and mental – of your specific sport. Then assign yourself a rating scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest energy output and 10 being the highest. Hiking

at your peak level may require an effort of 6 or 7. Running a 5K might require a 9 or 10. Decide what feels right for you.

Plan your workout or race so that you maximize your energy reserves. Marathons require a sustained energy level, whereas mountain biking requires short spikes in aerobic and mental energy. Being prepared for how you'll spend this energy will keep you from doubting whether you can go the distance.

COMPETITIVE DRIVE All successful athletes have a passion to compete, whether they're competing against others or themselves. Athletes who do have a healthy competitive drive see each day as an opportunity to improve an aspect of their sport, be it mental or physical. Try the following to develop your competitive spirit:

Seek out opportunities to compete. Instead of doing your normal six-miler on the weekend, sign up for a local 10K. Quantify your personal bests, and compare your results to others in your age group or those with similar abilities, setting small goals appropriate to your own improvement.

Understand that your fellow competitors represent something to overcome (a personal barrier), not someone to beat. This will help keep competition healthy and goal-oriented.

Stay balanced. Take time to rest and rejuvenate when appropriate. Enjoy a good book, spend time with friends, learn to make a new recipe. Your time away from athletic competition will allow you to gain proper perspective, and keep you hungry for more.

Incorporate these five mental skills into your physical training, working slowly at first and building momentum and confidence as you go. Over time these skills will become second nature, and you'll achieve results you never knew possible. Your only hurdle is getting out of your own way!

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