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Mental Skills for Training and Racing

By Matt Russ

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Being physically gifted is only one attribute of a successful athlete. There are many others that are not so easily quantified such as drive, ambition, determination, and the ability to focus mentally through adversity. These mental skills are not genetically imposed, but are learned from a variety of sources such as parents, coaches, sport psychologists and other athletes. Learning and refining your mental skills can give you an advantage over more talented but less focused athletes. The ability to focus mentally is equally important in training and racing, and can make each work out more productive. Mental skills are an often neglected part of training. It is advantageous to develop and refine your mental as well as your physical skills.

There are many internal and external stimuli that can invade your psyche and cause you to lose focus. Examples of external stimuli are weather, a chronic injury, or a malfunctioning bicycle. Internal factors that can reduce focus are fear (crash), self doubt, anger at another competitor, or simply a wandering mind. There are a variety of techniques to combat these stimuli. They include scanning, self coaching, reverse conditioning, and visualization.

Scanning is the practice of regularly monitoring and adjusting yourself as you train or race. If you use a heart rate monitor you must periodically check to make sure you are in the proper heart rate zone. Have you ever looked at your monitor and found yourself 10 beats out of your range? Scanning can prevent this from happening. Safety is a foremost concern, so make sure you are scanning the upcoming terrain, the course for obstacles or road debris, the riders around you, and traffic. Scanning your environment is especially important in a pack or pace line where you are riding in close quarters. Assuming you have a work out that considers heart rate, cadence, and timed intervals you must monitor and be aware of all these systems as you ride. Practice scanning this data at regular intervals and it will become a habit. You can also scan your riding for bad form, or to remind yourself to eat and drink. If you have particular techniques that need improvement, check your form every few minutes. "Is my back straight?" "Am I in proper climbing position?" Dehydration can drastically affect performance. You can set a watch alarm to remind yourself to drink every 10–15 minutes.

Mental Skills for Training and Racing

Have you ever talked to yourself as you competed or trained? You can develop the voice inside your head into a self coach by preparing mental responses to various cues or situations as you ride. If you have worked with a coach he or she observes your form and gives you instant feedback which, hopefully, you respond to and correct yourself. You can recreate these same coaching responses to cues and follow them with positive feedback. Take cornering for example. When you approach a turn (cue) you may repeat this sequence "SET IT UP (meaning choose your line), LEAN (into the turn), STAND (on the outside pedal), NOW HAMMER! (out of the turn)." By repeating this sequence you go through the mental process of properly cutting a turn, and are less likely to make a mistake. You already know mentally what to do, you just follow through physically. If you have a particular technical weakness, try to come up with a word sequence or sentence to talk yourself through the process. Mainly what you are accomplishing is creating a conscious habit. Eventually it will be performed automatically, and will become subconscious. As you complete a skill, give yourself positive feedback and encouragement as a coach would such as "good climb," or "time to sprint." If you did not complete

a task to satisfaction, objectively evaluate what went wrong and provide yourself specific feedback for improvement: "I hit my brakes too late in the turn."

Just as positive reinforcement helps you improve, negative reinforcement holds you back by fixating on your weaknesses. Negative thinking is like a headwind; it allows self-doubt to creep in and allows you to lose focus. There is nothing to be gained from this type of thinking, and it can reduce your performance or shut you down completely. Take the two phrases, "I can" and "I can't." If you were to perform two challenging climbs repeating each phrase over and over, which climb would you perform better on? Everyone has negative thoughts enter their mind. When they do, reverse conditioning can help combat that negativity. Simply come up with a counter phrase to combat the negative thought. Suppose you show up for your race and it starts to rain, instead of thinking "this will really slow me down," tell yourself "this will really slow the other riders down." Have a catch phrase or word to halt negative thinking before it enters your psyche such as "nothing is slowing me down," or "forward!" Do not fixate on that which is out of your control (weather), and stay focused on the current process (not the awards ceremony). Be specific in your reverse conditioning. If you are struggling on a climb, combat "I am not a climber," with "FORWARD! Smooth, steady, keep your spin up, and watch your form."

Visualization mentally prepares and focuses you on the job ahead. By walking through, and practicing a process in your head you are more likely to perform it properly in reality. An area I have found visualization particularly useful in is transitions. By visualizing each component of transition in order, dismounting, removing your helmet, shoes, etc., it will become more automatic in a race. Ride the course a day before the race, and then go over it in your head the night before. Where are the hills? Where are you strongest? Where should you attack? If you have a particularly difficult work out, visualize your effort and the outcome (improvement) before you start.

Essentially, the more intense the work the more important these mental skills will become. It is far easier to stay focused during an easy foundation work out, versus a hard tempo pace. The more specific the work becomes the more monitoring and mental focus is required. Racing is the most intense work you will do. If you have yourself mentally prepared and conditioned before the race you are already ahead.

Matt Russ has coached and trained athletes around the country and internationally. He currently holds licenses by USAT, USATF, and is an Expert level USAC coach. Matt has coached athletes for CTS (Carmichael Training Systems), is an Ultrafit Associate. Visit www.thesportfactory.com for more information.

Improving Soccer Skills With Soccer Training Gear

By Dana Bradley

The main objective when playing the game of soccer is to score a goal in the opposing teams' net and bypassing the goalie. This skill requires a great deal of practice, and a certain portion of muscle training and memory that needs to be acquired over time. With the proper soccer training gear, this goal can be accomplished, while improving other aspects of a player's soccer skills as well.

New technology in the field of sports training is constantly improving and expanding, but growing as a player ultimately comes down to the fundamentals and repetition. One soccer training device eliminates much of the time spent on retrieving out-of-play balls, allowing practice to become easier as a solo activity, rather than having a constant need to either chase balls yourself, or have a partner do it for you. This simple training device allows more time to be spent on practicing the basics of kicking, and goal placement.

Strength and endurance is another key aspect for all players to possess in order to be optimal soccer players, since a great majority of the 45 minute halves is spent running up and down the soccer field. The ability to outrun an opponent is crucial, and another soccer training device can aide players in doing just that. A rubber band-like cord that ties around the athletes waste, and is secured into the ground, offers resistance training and explosiveness when it comes to racing an opponent on the soccer field.

For some of the skills necessary to become an improved soccer player, training gear may not even be necessary. Going back to the skills learned as a child when first taught how to play the game of soccer, may be some of the best training equipment one can have. Practicing juggling and controlling the ball, quick feet to ball movements, and even just dribbling the ball while running can be some of the best training gear an athlete can have. The saying goes "Practice makes perfect", but essentially, it's more along the lines that "Practice make permanent". Repetition and control over the soccer ball without even having to think about it is what will make anyone a better soccer player.

Dana Bradley writes about

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