**Is Your Head Getting in the Way of Your Racing?**

*So what kind of a head do you have on your shoulders? Are you competing at the level that you’re capable of? Do you regularly perform better in practice than you do in important competitions? Are there particular opponents who you consistently lose to who have no business beating you? Do fears and self-doubts paralyze you and prevent you from performing to your potential. Are you the kind of athlete who regularly steals defeat from the closing jaws of victory?*

If some of these questions bother you, then you probably already know how critically important the mental part of your sport is. If you want to take your racing performance to the next level, then you have to be willing to take your training far beyond where most athletes stop. Most serious runners in XC religiously work on the physical part of the sport. They’ll work on their strength, fitness and endurance. They’ll work on the proper technique. You can’t become successful without “paying your physical dues” in this way. Hard work is definitely one of the main keys to your success on the course. Without it, you’ll quickly fall behind.

Unfortunately, this is where most runners stop. When they go into their races, they *hope* they’ll perform well, they *hope* that they’ll have their “A” game with them today, they hope that they’ll win. You would never leave your strength, conditioning or technique to chance. So why would you leave the most important part of your racing performance, the mental part to chance?

Think about this: Getting good as an athlete *in practice* is 95% physical and 5% mental. Translation: You have to work hard on your conditioning and “physical game” to make it happen. However, once you line up against your opponent, the percentages flip flop. Being successful is 95% mental and 5% physical. You have the conditioning, technique and the proper strategy, now you have to make sure that you ***stay calm under pressure*** and ***keep yourself focused on the right things***. For example, your concentration needs to stay in the moment, on responding immediately to the racing situation that you find yourself in and being ready to adjust at a moment’s notice to sudden and sometimes unexpected changes in the course. If you let your mind jump ahead to the future, (i.e. thinking about winning or losing) or slip back to the past (i.e. a previous mistake or run), then you’ll end up getting yourself too uptight and distracted to perform to your potential. This means that you have to be able to ***rebound quickly from your mistakes*** and not carry them into the next moment or race.

You have to ***believe in yourself*** and have the self-confidence to focus on yourself and not your opponents when you’re under pressure. You have to be able to handle ***last minute negativity and self-doubts***. You have to be able to master your fears.

With a little work, these mental skills as well as a few important others can be systematically trained to the point where you develop the reputation as a mentally tough competitor.

**The practice athlete:**

The athlete suddenly attaches far too much importance to the outcome of the performance and tells him/herself that "now it really counts and I can't make mistakes!" As a consequence, the athlete begins to experience ***much too much physical and mental tension,*** most of it revolving around the ***outcome*** of the competition. He/she begins to think way too much and, in the process, loses control of his/her focus of concentration.

So it seems that the "practice athlete" needs to learn how to relax more under pressure. This is certainly true, but not at the heart of the matter. ***What really needs to change is the athlete's pre-and during performance focus of concentration***. The athlete needs to learn to maintain the very same focus of concentration in games that he/she naturally maintains in practice. More specifically, the athlete needs to keep focused on the ***process*** of the performance (exactly what he/she is doing during practice) instead of on the ***outcome,***(whether I'll win, lose or mess-up).

***It's concentration which is the real culprit here***. Focusing on outcome going into a competition is what generates the nervousness and overthinking that always disrupts optimum performance. Most athletes focus on the *process*in practice rather than the outcome which is why they tend to do better there. So the trick is to teach the "practice athlete" how to maintain the very same concentration in games that they utilize in practice.

**The psyched out/intimidated athlete:**

**To avoid getting psyched out you must keep your concentration on YOU and YOUR JOB!**Keep your focus away from who's watching, what the coaches are thinking and especially, the reputation of, size or strength of the other team or players. Dwelling on the strengths of your opponent will only knock you off center and take you out of your game. The legendary UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden never scouted his opponents. His attitude was that if his team executed ***their game*** the way that ***they had been trained***, then what the opponent did would be a non-issue. In keeping his players focused on themselves, Wooden cut down on the possibility that his team would ever get intimidated.

***Focus on YOU*** to play your best. ***Focus on YOU*** to insure that your self-confidence remains high pre-game. **FOCUS ON YOU TO AVOID PSYCH-OUTS AND INTIMIDATION!**

**Negative Thoughts athlete:**

***Negative self-talk is nothing more than brain wave activity***. It doesn't predict the future and it won't make you play better. When you listen to it, it will only serve to mentally take you out of the game, tighten your muscles and kill your self-confidence. When you hear that "inner coach" of yours starting to get down on you for that mistake, try to relax and refocus on the game. If the negativity persists, relax and refocus. Do NOT ever try to shut the negative thoughts up. Fighting the negative thinking in this way only gives it more energy, making it stronger. Instead, notice the negative thoughts and quickly and calmly refocus on the current play. Keep in mind one thing about last minute self-doubts and negative thinking. It is still possible for you to have the performance of your life when you're flooded with last minute negativity as long as you stay calm and refocus.

**What are the qualities of the mentally tough runner?**

Here are some of the common themes I’ve observed among runners who succeed. There are several key traits that make up mental toughness. Regardless of where you are in your training, you can become a mentally tough runner and make this your strength.

**Resilience:** The ability to bounce back from adversity, pain or a disappointing performance. The mentally tough runner can realize and admit a mistake, understand a missed opportunity, isolate the lesson, and quickly move on to focus on the immediate goal ahead.

**Focus:** The ability to focus in the face of distractions or unexpected circumstances. The mentally tough runner doesn’t avoid situations, but instead addresses them right away. For example, when you’re in the last miles of the marathon, you feel dead tired, you’re hurting, and you want to quit. That is the time to focus. You say, “I must keep moving forward, just this step, one more step.” And you’ll likely get to the finish line when you are mentally tough.

**Strength:** The ability to handle an unforeseen turn of events and remain balanced and calm, continuing to be competitive. The mentally tough runner remains both strong and flexible, able to respond to any situation that arises.

**Preparation:** The ability to anticipate situations ahead of time and feel prepared so there is a plan of action for anything that might happen. The mentally tough runner doesn’t panic in a crisis (falling back in a race or a workout, for example). For instance, you may be in a race, and your competitor moves in front of you. You have a method to stay mentally calm, adjust your pace, and follow through with your plan.

**Vision:** The ability to keep moving forward with your objective, even when there are no immediate signs of getting closer to the finish line. The mentally tough runner creates a clear picture of the goal, visualizes it often, and keeps that image in the forefront no matter what. You imagine all the possible scenarios, and have a plan for moving through each one successfully.

**Openness:** The ability to learn and be open to all possibilities. The mentally tough runner is willing to listen and take feedback, knowing that’s where real changes take place. You listen to that inner voice that says, “I can do this. I have all the tools and resources inside to create my own success.”

**Trust:** The ability to have faith in oneself. The mentally tough runner learns to trust that the body will know what to do when it’s race time. You trust in your training and your plan. You trust in your coach. You believe in yourself, even when there is no one close by to boost your confidence. You go with what you know, even when your support system is not present at the race. You stay mentally tough and keep moving forward, even when the finish line seems far away. You say, “Every step brings me closer to my goal.”