

Mental Training

Overview

Most athletes spend a great deal of time physically training their bodies for the rigors of competitive sport. While physical training is undoubtedly necessary, it is not the whole key to successful competition. The mind also plays an important part in athletic success.

In x-c running, mental skills can be used to overcome a variety of situations. Specifically, **visualizing a positive outcome** can be used to overcome pre-competition nervousness. **Positive self-talk** and **affirmations** can be used to block out pain during tough parts of races. Indeed, the mind can control how the body reacts to a situation.

Fortunately, a number of mental training techniques are available to contribute to success as a runner. Mastering these techniques, however, takes regular practice.

Specific Techniques

The following mental techniques can help when running. Depending upon the technique, they may be practiced before, during, or after a workout or race:

- **Visualization:** The *self-fulfilling prophecy* (i.e. if I think it, then it will come true) can have a powerful affect on success in sport. Visualization involves mentally rehearsing positive outcomes of future events. For example, one might lay down, relax, and think about how a future race will play out. The person will visualize himself or herself running quickly and effortlessly, overcoming any

obstacles, etc. The more vivid the visualization (i.e. sights, sounds, and smells), the more powerful the visualization experience.

- **Positive Self Talk:** Self talk is the "internal dialog" which goes through a person's mind. For example, when running, a person might "tell" himself or herself that he or she is tired and feeling sluggish. If this is the case, then the *self-fulfilling prophecy* (see above) will work against the person's performance. Positive self talk, on the other hand, can contribute to a higher performance. Training the mind to "say" things like "I'm feeling really good today" or "this isn't really that hard" keeps the internal "dialog" positive and should result in better performance.
- **Internal Affirmations:** Self compliments can be useful for overcoming tough patches in races or workouts. For example, a runner may tell himself or herself things like: "I'm faster to this point than I was last week" or "I've never felt this good at this point in a race." In essence, internal affirmations are another version of positive self talk.
- **Relaxation/Psyching:** Many athletes find that performing a set routine before a competition puts them in the proper frame of mind before a competition. This can include activities such as stretching, easy running, lying down to visualize, or listening to music. After a period of time, these activities become automatic and cue the body that a performance situation is about to take place. Ideally, these activities will result in the athlete becoming physically relaxed, mentally relaxed, focused on the moment, and in a state of optimal arousal prior to the competition.
- **Focusing/Monitoring** The ability to concentrate on the task at hand and block out unnecessary stimuli can be very useful for runners. If the mind is allowed to wander, the runner can often find himself or herself drifting back off the pace. Focusing on relevant stimuli like what the competition is doing, the rate of breathing, and split times can prevent mind wandering. The goal is to keep within the present moment. Focusing and monitoring skills can be practiced during workouts; with practice, they become automatic.

- **Mental Bargaining:** Making "mental deals" with oneself is an excellent way to overcome barriers when running. For example, if a runner has a mile left to go in a race, rather than focusing on running fast for the whole mile, the runner might bargain with himself or herself by splitting the distance up into quarters. The self talk might play out as follows: "All right, I have a mile to go. That's four 1/4 miles. Running 1/4 miles at this pace is relatively easy. Let's run this first 1/4 (which will be easy) fast and see how it goes." In essence, mental bargaining is really "reframing on the fly." (see below.)
- **External Affirmations:** In most cases, running spectators are very supportive, both to teammates and non-teammates alike. Comments such as "you're looking good" or "keep up the strong pace" tend to be offered to all competitors regardless of position in the race. The smart competitor will take these comments at a face value and use them to augment any internal affirmations or positive self talk.
- **Reframing:** After a negative experience (e.g. having a poor race), the tendency for many is to dwell on the negative. Reframing challenges the athlete to look at the experience in a different, more positive way. For example, after a poor race, the athlete might reframe the experience as follows: "Well, the result may not be what I had expected, but the race was a difficult training session which will make me even more fit for the next time I race."

Conclusion

Mental training alone will not produce great athletic performance . However, when combined with proper physical training and racing strategy, mental training can make a difference. Additionally, regular and structured mental skills practice is needed to reach peak performance.