

Training for The Mental Game

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August 2018

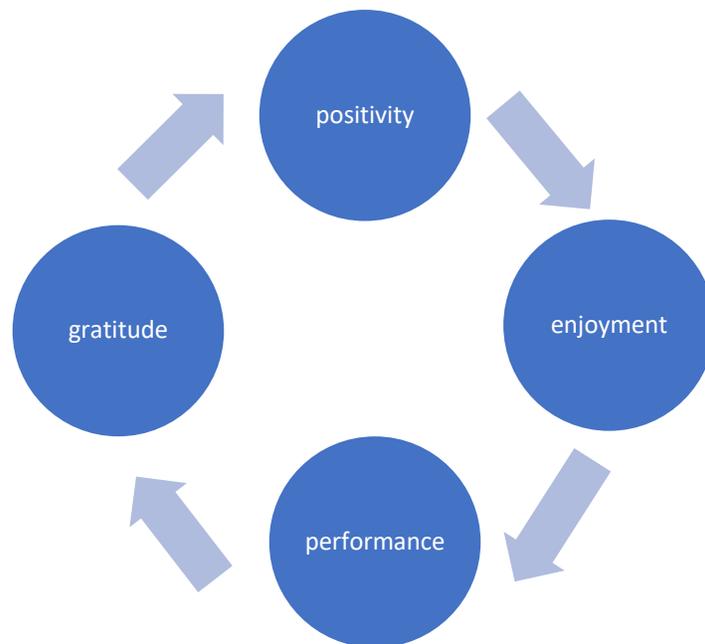
You run with your legs, lungs, heart, and brain. Of these, the brain is the most challenging to train. In fact, it's the heaviest 3 pounds you will carry across the finish line!

That's why you need to train for your mental game alongside your physical training. So, start training your brain now!

Let's define "mental game." It is:

- A discipline.
- A long-cultivated habit of building and sustaining a positive mind capable of turning every experience into fuel.

That second bullet is worth repeating: "The mind is capable of turning *every* experience into fuel."



Positivity, gratitude, enjoyment, performance form a *self-fueling cycle*.

How to Train Mentally Before the Race

For each long training run, practice being totally prepared:

- Eat well beforehand (and not too much or too late).

- Get good sleep the night(s) before the run.
- Study the course and visualize your training run.
- Have a plan—your goal for the run, how to get to the training run on time, when to take in fluid/energy, the pace you plan to run, what you will wear considering the weather, etc.
- During your training runs, create and practice mantras. Mantras are phrases you can repeat over and over, in rhythm with your running. Some that I've used include:
 - Run free; run like the wind, eye of the tiger.
 - Run fearless; fear is where the fun is.
 - Press, press, baby (meaning: push rather than let up).
 - God is good, all the time.

What are your mantras?
- Also create and practice affirmations (self-praise). Some that I've used include:
 - I'm a hard worker.
 - I can run this pace forever.
 - I have heart.
 - I am Joan Benoit Samuelson; I am Nick Panebianco (my running team coach).
 - I've got this; I am strong; I can do this.
 - I recognize this; this is the hard work I expected.

What are your affirmations?
- Consider race day what-if scenarios. Plan for:
 - Unexpected cold, hot, wet, windy weather.
 - Injury; unexpected recurrence of old injury.
 - Porta-potty needs.
 - Running out of steam.

What are you most afraid of? Prepare for it!
- Trust your training. All runners who follow the MCC Summer Training Program, with very few exceptions, finish their target race.
- Before the race, set a plan. This includes your hydrating/fueling plan (at Mile X and Y or at certain time intervals), your pace plan, etc. (Coach Nick will provide more information on race planning).
- Set multiple goals. Before the race, I write down a list of 15-20 goals. I always include three *outcome* (time) goals: realistic, conservative, and so-audacious-I-don't-tell-anyone. Other *process* goals I've set for myself include:
 - Stay upright the entire race.
 - Get to the starting line on time.
 - Own the hills.
 - Run a negative split (run the second half faster than the first half).

- Kick it (run as hard as you can) for the last half-mile/mile.
- Learn something new.
- Do something nice for another runner.

What are your race goals?

How to Be Strong Mentally During the Race

- Recite those mantras and affirmations you've been practicing during training. NOTE: It's important to practice ahead of time. I find it difficult to recall *anything* during the race itself, unless I've laid down strong tracks in my brain.
- Associate. Do a head-to-toe body check: breathing, posture, turnover, arm action, footfall, refueling/rehydration needs. Also focus on the environment around you. Have the racers ahead of you pull you along. Pick a landmark up ahead and run to it; then pick another landmark.
- Dissociate. Find a happy place and put your mind there:
 - Think about vacation plans, how you might redecorate a room, your sponsors, what you're grateful about.
 - Some mathematically oriented people like to solve problems such as calculating pace based on mile markers.
 - Some people recite music lyrics or poetry.
 NOTES: These last two are way too hard for me to do during a race. Also, be careful with dissociation. You can slow down without meaning to, if you let your mind drift too far away.
- Visualize.
 - Put a hook into the runner in front of you and let her pull you; lock onto her heels.
 - Put the chattering monkeys into a harness and have them pull you.
 - Visualize yourself as a cheetah.
- Reframe:
 - I hate running→ I am so brave and fierce to be taking on this challenge.
 - This hill is hard→ Let's see if I can charge up this hill.
 - I can't make it→ I will be so proud when I make it to the finish line.
 - There are so many more miles to go→ Being here, in this race right now, is exactly where I want to be.
- Count. Whenever my head goes into a bad place, I say, "Time to start counting!" I usually count in a rhythm to my footfalls: *1-2-3-4*, *2-2-3-4*, *3-2-3-4* or thirty-*three*, thirty-*four*, thirty-*five*. Eventually my mind drifts elsewhere and I don't need to count anymore. If I need to, I might start over at 1, or I might jump to 100 and count backwards.
- Smile. Researchers say that when you are happy you smile and that the reverse is also true. Smiling will make you feel good. And, it might trigger other runners around you or spectators to smile, which can also re-energize you.
- Focus on the moment. If you are dreading a section ahead, reframe (see above): "This part at least is easy, I'm going to enjoy this moment!"

- Draw energy from the other runners and from the crowds. If someone is cheering for Shirley, say, “I’m Shirley! Go me!”
- If a challenge comes up (and challenges will come up!), calmly proceed according to how you have planned. Don’t dwell on grim possibilities that haven’t occurred. If you start to get nervous about bad things that could happen, remind yourself that you have planned as best you can and that you will cope if the need arises.
- Trust your training.

How to Be Strong Mentally During the Final Miles

- Allow yourself to start thinking about the rewards and the celebration that will occur after you cross the finish line.
- Visualize the finish line itself and how you will smile and raise your arms in joy!
- Dissociate by reviewing the segments you’ve already completed.
- Count *hard*.
- Remind yourself that now is *not* the time to slow down or give up on your goals.
- Remember, when you “hit the wall,” you are not slowing down as much as you think you are.
- At the very least, tell yourself, “I can have a strong finish!” I myself have learned that the last mile takes care of itself. You’ll be kicking—the horses will be running back to the barn—it’s all steam and out of your hands—it’s the hardest but truly, the most-fun part.
- Trust your training.

How to Keep Building Your Mental Game After the Race

- Review your goals. Check off the goals completed. Put double-checks next to the goals you’re really proud of. Put squiggles next to the goals you could do better at next time.
- Consider lessons learned.
- Consider how you’ve grown as an athlete *and* as a person
- Write notes to yourself on your goals page (you will want to review them before future races).
- Bask in the glory of a task accomplished.
- Set new goals.

“Learn something and let yourself do it. You’ve trained your body for the run—don’t let your mind second-guess how to run it on race day. LET YOURSELF RUN.”

Dr. Neal Bowes, sports psychologist