

TAKE YOUR MENTAL GAME ON THE ROAD

Seven Action Strategies to Psych-Up for the Marathon

By John J. Bowman, Ph.D.

Are you one of those thousands of runners putting in the trial of miles to prepare for an upcoming Marathon?

Would you like to double the benefit of each training run?

Are you interested in building your mental toughness but don't have the time or resources to consult with a Sport Psychologist?

If you answered yes to all three questions then read on.

Over the past decade a major shift has occurred in the application of Sport Psychology to improving athletic performance. In many individual sports like tennis, running, and golf, mental training and physical training are no longer conducted separately, but are now being integrated in such a way as to simulate the demands of the activity on both the mind and body. The impetus for this shift emerged from Sport Psychology research in the 1980's that concluded that *mental toughness is a global (mind/body) response that stems from physical arousal that is closely connected to positive emotions*. In other words the most effective preparation for a challenging event is to train the body and mind together. For runners this translates into taking our mental training on the road. Here are 7 strategies for building psyching skills and mental toughness during your workouts.

Let Your Butterflies Paint a Picture

Are you beginning to get those butterflies in your stomach just thinking about the day of the race? Sport Psychologists call this Pre-Competitive Anxiety and have developed several effective techniques to reduce this discomfort while improving your mental preparation. One strategy is to switch lenses on your mental camera from your Micro Zoom which focuses directly on the day of the Marathon to a Wide Angle lens that takes in the whole picture. Imagine that this is not a still picture but rather a movie that tells your personal story about the Marathon. Ask yourself: What is this movie about? What is the story line? What lesson will it teach? How will it end? By viewing this whole experience as your unique story each scene becomes more important. Every training run is a new scene you are shooting and come race day all you have to do is edit all the scenes and put them together to tell your story. By changing lenses it gives your butterflies more room to fly and be creative as you take them on the road.

Build a Pyramid of Goals

Unquestionably Goal Setting is the most power tool for improving performance and achieving your goal (story) in any area of life, be it sports, business, or personal growth. Begin your Goal Setting process by envisioning a pyramid. At the base of the pyramid is your vision or story describing the big picture and how you want it to look. Built on this base are your Long Term Goals, the precise levels of achievement which you are striving to accomplish. (ex. Complete the Half Marathon in under 3 hours) On the next level of

the pyramid are your Weekly Performance Goals which specify the frequency, intensity, and duration of your workouts for the week. (ex. 3 five mile runs at 8:30 min./mile, and 2 interval training days with 4 half mile intervals) At the top of the pyramid are your physical and mental goals for each training session. These daily goals consist of both performance goals (what you are going to do) and process goals (how you will do it). For example, you can set a physical goal of keeping your hand at waist height during your race pace while using a mental picture of your hands being two pendulums swinging effortlessly back and forth. By using the Pyramid of Goals, every workout is directly connected to your big story. Feeling good about achieving your daily and weekly goals is not only motivational, but also has a cumulative effect on your attitude come race day.

Create a Muscle Memory Map

Periodically during training tune into your pace, your thoughts, and your emotions at different segments of the run. Now, let your mind shift to imagining yourself running the Marathon and ask yourself: Where do I want to experience this again? Is this how I want to feel at the start? Is this exactly what I want to be doing at mile 10 or at the finish? Then project yourself into that part of the race completely, feeling what you would feel, seeing what you would see, and hearing what you would hear. By connecting different “running states” with specific places on your mental map of the race you are creating muscle memory that will be called up automatically during the Marathon. In this way you are assisting your mental training by allowing your body to signal you when it is time to shift gears.

Positive Self Talk and Power Words

Dr. Milton Erickson, the father of modern hypnosis once said, “Words are powerful, be careful how you use them.” During your training runs experiment with different words or phrases to keep you in a positive frame of mind, especially when you are encountering physical or emotional fatigue. Try affirmations like: All the way; Yes, I can; or Smooth and Relaxed; or power words like: Tough or Strong. Gradually you will find phrases that feel right for different aspects of your run. In addition to being helpful during training, these affirmations and power words will prove to be valuable resources when you construct your Race Focus Plan just prior to the Marathon.

Use Imagery to Communicate with Your Body

Imagery is the language of the body is a well established principal in mind/body communication. To demonstrate this for yourself take a few minutes now and imagine slicing into a fresh lemon and cutting out a section with the juices dripping off it. Now, imagine bringing this slice of lemon up toward your mouth and at the same time smelling its distinctive aroma. Do you find that your mouth is beginning to salivate? This simple image clearly communicated a signal that your body responded to. During your training use this principal to let your mind help your body stay relaxed, keep a steady pace, build up speed, or maintain good form by creating a picture in your mind. For example, when running downhill picture yourself as a sled sliding effortlessly down a snowy slope, or when you are mentally fatigued, you can picture your lower body as being a horse that your upper body is riding upon. Look around and take in the sights as you enjoy your ride. Perhaps you may want to emulate Olympic Marathon Gold Medalist Frank

Shorter's strategy of imagining his legs as bike wheels to create a smooth flowing pace. Experiment with different imagery strategies during your workouts and put them in the back of your mind to pull out at just the right time during the Marathon.

Reframe the Pain

Plan on being aware of discomfort during the Marathon by gauging your level of physical discomfort when you are training at your race pace. Then tell yourself, "This is my body's way of telling me that I am running at my race pace." Once you have acknowledged these feelings as feedback you can disconnect from them and shift your focus to other things such as your positive self-talk, power words, or Race Focus Plan. By reframing these physical sensations as a signal from your body that you are in your groove you change the emotional response to the feelings. Dr. David Yukelson, a Sport Psychologist at Pennsylvania State University and consultant to the USA Track and Field Association emphasizes the need to move past the pain. "If all you do is hope the pain or fatigue you experience when you're running will just go away, it probably won't," says Yukelson. "But if you have a strategy ready to replace the pain, you can often mask it enough so you don't end up dwelling on it". (Remember, we are referring here to the normal sensation of discomfort that comes with prolonged exertion. This needs to be distinguished from injury pain which is a signal that you need to stop and attend to the injury.)

Create a Focus Plan for your Mind

Running any distance over 100 yards usually entails a running plan or strategy. (For example: I'll start out slow, build up to my pace and finish strong at the end) Consequently, all distance runners are familiar with the process of planning a specific running strategy for various components of a race. Focus Planning is very similar to Race Planning except you are selecting specific thoughts to focus on at predetermined segments in the race. One simple way to accomplish this is to obtain (or draw) a map of the marathon course and divide it into about 6 to 8 segments which are associated with a different pace or race strategy. If possible use identifiable landmarks on the course that mark the beginning of each race segment. Now, think of a word, phrase, or image that you want to be focusing on during this race segment and write it on your map. Together with your race strategy these pre-selected thoughts or images constitute a complete Race Focus Plan. This can be valuable to you in several ways. First it will dramatically increase your ability to run your race thus allowing you to systematically evaluate your pre-race routine and race strategies. It will also help you be more confident and relaxed going into the race because you will have rehearsed many times what you will be thinking during the race, thus reducing the probability of focusing on pain or other negative thoughts. Finally, by connecting specific thoughts with predetermined specific components of the race you will be creating associations between your mental focus and your physical activity in the same way that muscle memory created associations between running states and mental images. While you are racing each of these components acts like a switch to turn on the other. For example, if your focus plan calls for you to concentrate on the image of yourself being pulled toward the finish by a long bungee cord attached to your waist while you are in your kick, you may find that each time you sprint at this pace your mind may shift automatically into this image.

Noted performance consultant, Peter F. Drucker posited that “unless commitment is made there are promises and hopes, but not plans”. By planning out and engaging these seven psyching strategies during your training you will be making a strong commitment to envisioning, creating, and living your marathon story.

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