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## Training The Brain: Mental Strategies For Training And Racing

The age old questions we face:

How do we balance life and training? How do we maintain successful relationships, careers, families, friendships ... and still have the time to train? How do we optimize our training, both physically and mentally?

The brain (central nervous system, or CNS) controls everything. The brain can be trained much as we do with the body. Cognitive strategies will have an impact on the central nervous system, endocrine, and immune systems and subsequently have an impact on all other systems (i.e. musculoskeletal). Cognitive input can also be a very powerful limiter (or facilitator).

First things first: underlying every behavior is a positive intention. It is or was perceived as appropriate given the *context* in which it was established, from the point of view of the person whose behavior it is. It is important to acknowledge the *underlying behaviors* – some will be very self-constructive, others will be very self-destructive. If we understand our *motivators* (both external and internal) then we can use this understanding to find this balance.

### ***Why do we train?***

**Fitness:** “I like being active”, “I like how I feel when I am outdoors”, “It’s good for my health”. This is the most basic reason for training. In order to optimize fitness, we must acknowledge the importance of rest and recovery time – your body adapts while it’s NOT training. More training does not necessarily equate to greater results.

**Achievement** – “I like challenging myself”. Some of us like to challenge our comfort zones, and training and racing can be a great way to do so. We all have an internal reference point which does not necessarily involve others – “I am not as fast, not as strong, etc”.

**Stress relief** – “I exercise because I am under a lot of stress at work/home/etc”. Given the information in #1, then there may need to be associated mechanisms to address – which may have nothing to do with training.

**Self-image** – “I like how I feel about myself”. Though we may feel better about ourselves due to the fitness and achievement, or how we look, training does not define us as individuals. Every day will not be a stellar performance – nor would it be expected in day-to-day life ... so if it’s a “bad training day” it’s not stressful but just “as it is”. We may enter into training with a “fear of failure” or a “fear of success” – both are aspects of potentially self-destructive behaviors that may be reflected in both training and life.

**Life avoidance** – “I do this to get out of the house”. . Training can be a means of distraction. Acknowledging the issues will go a long way to allowing training to have a healthy place in your life

### ***How can we use this knowledge to our benefit?***

1. Consider what is truly important in that “**big picture**”. Prioritize. Have a plan. “Begin with the end in mind”. Balancing life and training can be a challenge. Training has importance, it has its place, but it also needs to be put in perspective – even if you are an elite athlete. By optimizing your training (with appropriate recovery days) not only do you allow your body to adapt, but you have

time for the rest of life! Mentally, this eases the challenge of training by establishing a better holistic balance. It's easy to get "tunnel vision" ... sometimes a coach can help provide some "big picture perspective" so that you do have balance.

2. Develop a **"Zen" mind**. Meditation. Flow. "Just being within the moment". Clearing your mind. Life (and training) is a journey and not a destination. Though there will be some milestones along the way (good and bad), both are journeys that we take moment to moment. Even after all the training for a big race, the race itself is just another step in the process. This process of discovery while training, learning more about yourself and what you are capable of – this can translate into life lessons. Allow yourself to learn and experience – be open to it, even in the adverse times – and develop an inner awareness.
3. Understand your motivators and how they relate to a healthy **self-image**. Everyone presents to the world with a perception of their self-image and self-efficacy. We all operate on our models of reality – so what we believe is, in essence, our reality. Our lives are defined by much more than the training miles we do. What we say to ourselves in the course of a day is our perceived reality. Up to 70% of our self talk in a day is negative in nature. Self-image can be a very significant self-limiter and can be reflected in issues such as "fear of failure" and "fear of success". Our inherent nature is to maintain our current "comfort zone" – when this is broached repeatedly, we have a choice to either expand our comfort zone or do whatever we can to stay within our current one. Though many will choose to broaden their comfort zones, many will be involved in self-destructive behaviors in order to maintain their current comfort zone. Acknowledge self-destructive behaviors and be vigilant about addressing them - in sport AND life.
4. Develop the ability to maintain focus on the task at hand, otherwise known as **attentional focus**. This could be affected by many factors such as pain. There are two primary techniques that should be considered with respect to attentional focus – associative and dissociative techniques. Associative techniques seek to focus attention on aspects of the current "performance" that resemble the thoughts/feelings related to a previous good performance or experience. For example, thinking about how you felt when you were running well – and using as many different mental images as possible to associate with the experience of what "a good run" feels like. Dissociative techniques seek to draw attention away from the current aspects that may be negative. For example, having a difficult run and focusing on street signs – focusing on getting to the next marker, then focusing on the next marker, etc.
5. Develop **visualization and imagery skills**. This involves creating a "movie in your mind", being able to visualize an event or a training session "the way it is supposed to be". Higher level athletes such as downhill skiers can actually close their eyes and visualize the course as they would be during an event – sometimes to the level that the total time it takes to mentally visualize is the total time it would take to perform the event itself in real-time! Make the images vivid. This will actually facilitate the appropriate patterns of motor recruitment. Visualization could also be used during the rehabilitation process to imagine tissue repairing, macrophages "gobbling up" cells during repair, etc.

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*Allan Besselink is a physical therapist with 19 years of clinical experience. He graduated from Queen's University (Kingston, Canada) with a Bachelor of Science in Physical Therapy. Allan is one of approximately 300 practitioners internationally that have attained the Diploma in Mechanical Diagnosis and Therapy from the McKenzie Institute International in New Zealand. His international sports physical therapy experience includes the 1996 Summer Olympics and 1988 World Junior Track and Field Championships. He worked with the United States track and field team at the 1994 World Cup of Athletics, the 1997 World Cup Racewalk, and the 2001 World Half Marathon Championships. Allan is the Director of Smart Sport Internaional and is currently coaching a number of endurance athletes ranging from triathletes to ultrarunners across the United States and Canada.*