

The Mental Side of Distance Running

Ask a group of veteran distance runners what it takes to finish a marathon, and most will tell you that the event is as much a mental battle as it is a physical one. Yet most, if not all of our focus in training tends to be on the physical components of running and fitness.

Attention to the mental and psychological side of distance running can go a long way toward enabling success on race day. There are proven tools and tricks that can be employed during training (and even outside of training) to help get you 'in the zone' on the big day.

First, here are some traits that help define a successful distance runner (and person, for that matter), who has incorporated psychological training into their overall program:

- They know what success is (via well defined goals), and how to achieve it.
- They make things happen, not let them happen (are proactive rather than reactive).
- They love challenges (and can summon the necessary motivation)
- They can control their energy (self control)
- They perform 'in the zone' on race day.

Having the right mental approach and attitude is key to all of the above traits. To this end, there are ways you can work to hone your mental approach.

During and after training, you can work to train your imagination (visualization). This can be accomplished by recalling successful and enjoyable runs and races and creating a personal 'highlight reel' in your mind. You can recall this 'film' at any time for motivation. The more complete the better with respect to all of the senses involved with a run (sights, sounds, the feelings in your legs and body, your breathing, etc). The sky and your imagination are the only limits. When first starting out, this can be done in the evening, when you are relaxing, or prior to falling asleep. It takes a bit of practice, but can be very effective.

Having a positive approach to your running and handling adversity are key too. To improve this, it's important to be able to detect your thoughts and understand any fears you may have. Identify negative thoughts and be proactive in replacing them with positive ones. A successful runner sees a road block as a challenge, not as an obstacle. Work on motivation to overcome these road blocks. Recall positive experiences (via the above mentioned visualization exercises). In essence, conditions in a race are what they are, you the runner allow them to either be 'good' or 'bad'. Given the choice, why not put the positive spin on it?

Motivation will be discussed in more detail in an upcoming post, but in general, the motivation you find to complete your training can be a powerful ally on race day. If you can derive as much (or more) pleasure and satisfaction from training as you do from racing, then you have definitely found the right mental combination for longevity as a runner. If you can adopt the attitude of "I will prepare to the best of my ability, I will race with a smart tactical and mental plan, and, I will take what the day will give me" then you are already a winner, and the race clock will take care of itself.

Good luck. And as always, send in any training questions you may have.

Happy Trails!
Coach Jack