

Mental Energy in Endurance Sports

by Steven Jonas, M.D., M.P.H., M.S.

“Energy” is a frequent topic of conversation among endurance sports athletes and their advisors. We usually think about and discuss the subject in terms of food and muscle energy, or the rest/energy equation, or the role of the (supposed) energy enhancing dietary supplements that are ever-increasing in availability. Perhaps not so frequently discussed is another important aspect of energy: that of the mind, mental energy. In my view, when talking about training with patients and clients, it is one worth paying some attention to.

My good friend Bob Roses, a 74-year-old ski instructor in the Ski and Ride School at Breckenridge, Colorado, likes to say that “skiing is 90 percent mental—and the rest is in your head.” Most skiers know that he is not far off the mark. Many endurance athletes would recognize the applicability of the saying to our sports as well.

As far as skiing is concerned, at least until one starts going into rather steep

trails, or gets into “the bumps,” or sets out to go fast, the technical/mechanical aspects of the sport are pretty simple. It’s the mental stuff that’s tough: dealing with the fear of falling and getting injured; the counter-intuitiveness of the body movements that produce skiing in balance (e.g., the necessity of leaning forward at the ankles and away from the slope, when our body says, “Stay back and close that protective surface”); and the requirement for staying mentally focused constantly, if you want to stay on your feet, not hit or get hit by objects that could cause harm, and have fun.

Similarly, until you get fairly far along into trying to go fast, the technical stuff in, for example, a triathlon is not that demanding. Swimming for the recreational triathlete is about staying afloat and moving forward at a comfortable rate of speed, while not losing one’s way or falling too far behind the pack. For most of us, cycling is, well, just like riding a bike. As for running, other than making sure that your heel strike comes first and you’re pushing off from your toes while trying to keep your upper body quiet, it’s “left-right, left-right.”

As with skiing, until you strive to reach a higher level of proficiency, in triathlon developing the mental skills is much more demanding than developing the physical ones, even for the super-fast. Mark Allen is the all-time Hawaii Ironman champion. In 2003, *Triathlete* magazine designated him as the “Greatest Triathlete of Our Time.” He once described doing an ironman primarily as an exercise in pain management, surely a mental process. And so we might want to discuss the matter with our patients/clients who are into endurance sports—especially racing in them—in the following terms.

The mental work begins with the training. Unless you’re going to do just one or two races a year, you will likely want to get into shape and stay in shape, on a year-round basis. You must build up your endurance to a level that will carry you through the longest race you plan to do in a particular season, at a speed that is realistic and achievable for you. This takes focus, discipline and planning. This takes the ability and the determination to set balanced priorities for the whole of your life while providing the time and place for your training

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and racing. It takes training with consistency in time and length of workouts, and regularity in doing them. All of these tasks, central to success however you may define it, are mental, not physical.

Then there are the mental aspects of racing (in addition to Mark Allen’s pain management exercise). First are your race-specific strategies and tactics, to which you should devote some thought. There is the necessity of staying mentally focused during the race, although perhaps not on a second-by-second basis as in skiing. But before these and beyond them, if you are going to enjoy the experience, first and foremost you have to set goals for your racing experience that are reasonable for you in the context of other parts of your life.

Do you simply want to cross the finish line, happily and healthily? (If your age group is thin, as it is for many masters like me, maybe you WILL still come away with a plaque.) Do you want to try to go faster, for one reason or another? Is today the day to go for a personal best in a particular race? The mental skills for answering these questions and others come down to assessing yourself honestly, defining success in a way that makes sense to you, and then setting goals that are consistent with your self-

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Steven Jonas crossing the finish line of the 1998 World Master's Game Triathlon, Hagg Lake, OK.

quite!) embarrassing degree. I was expecting a nomination at any moment, for president or pope or something really special. I waved again and again to the adoring, applauding crowd. The thought occurred to me that maybe I was a world stud god duathlete from Clark Kent's neighboring planet. I

admit it—I started to get a bit carried away with myself.

However, when Dr. Sampson and other familiar competitors did not finish soon thereafter and the minutes continued to pass, I began to wonder what was going on. Did all these top performers drop out?

Before long, I realized my time (2 hours and 45 minutes) might be a little too good to be true. Even for an extraterrestrial, this was really fast. Yet, I was certain I did not inadvertently cut the course, as the first run and bike loops were unmistakable, the timing was done with electronic chips and there were always others around at all the key turns. I knew I did not stray from the course during the first two loops on the run or the two loops on the bike, and I completed the entire last loop on the run. *What's going on?* I wondered.

It turned out the race distance called for two loops on the second run, not one as I somehow assumed. I had skipped an entire loop—so I lopped off about 18 minutes! I had mistakenly run 4K too little.

Then I had to go over to the race officials and disqualify myself. There would be no awards, no spot secured on the U.S. team and no glory for a great race. I was an earthling after all, and not a very smart one, at that.

I did a little checking later on and discovered this excerpt from the race Web site, which I should have read or known about *before* the race: "The Run: the first and second runs will both be 8K, versus a 10K first run and 5K second run. The two 'out-and-back dog legs' have been removed to keep participants on the perimeter of the host facility property versus running near abandoned buildings. These 'dog legs' [have been] a sore spot with many participants...so, they are history."

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was two loops last year, also. (Two years ago it was one loop.) In any event, everyone else knew it was two loops so I couldn't say "I'm a victim" and retain Johnny Cochran to go for millions due to pain and suffering, loss of prestige, mental duress and so on. Instead, I had to find a lesson to learn from the experience, but none came to mind at first. My first thought was, *I'm an idiot*, but I soon decided there were better, more constructive lessons—and I needed to look for them.

A few days after returning from Birmingham, another competitor friend heard my story and suggested I had suffered a "brain freeze," given the severe cold and high winds during the race that Sunday morning in Birmingham. That was too kind; my big mistake was not knowing the race distances. That seems incredible, and happened due to an amazing confluence of unfavorable circumstances. The odd 8K distances, the fact that nobody was around me at the critical turn after the first loop on the second leg, and my getting to the race site at the last minute all contributed. Eventually, the lessons fell into place. They include:

- It's just one race—no big deal. Learn from the experience and move on. This lesson can be applied to all kinds of life situations, such as losing a job, a relationship, your mind (just kidding) and so on.
- Find something positive in the experience. That's easy for me in this instance—I had a training session that would have been impossible under non-race conditions.
- Be prepared. Know the course; know the rules. It's hard to compete at your best if you don't know whether you're running a mile or a marathon.

History, indeed. That's the tale of my race, but this particular history will not be allowed to repeat itself. I did this race last year and the year before, and I would have sworn there was only one loop for the second run, but Dr. Sampson and everyone else

later told me that it

- When things go awry and you need someone to blame for your misfortune, start at home. Get personal. Chances are, you need look no further.

Of course, I have learned these lessons before but obviously forgot them, so repeating the "course" was a good thing.

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assessment and definition of success. These are the keys to mobilizing your mental energy and making it work for you.

Finally, if at some time you feel your mental energy lagging, if you find that you are having trouble maintaining your training program, if you start looking at your races without happy anticipation, in my view (and experience) the first thing to do is go through the self-assessment/defining-success/goal-setting process we have discussed in this column in the past. You may well be amazed at what some realistic redefining of success and resetting of goals can do for your mental energy level.

In training and racing, as in life, we need to keep everything in perspective. To stay up in life, as on skis, we need to learn how to use our minds to accomplish these ends. Once we do that we can discover one of the few arenas in life where using energy properly actually creates it, in an amount greater than that spent to fuel the process to begin with, in a lovely upward spiral.

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