

Mind games

Some days you feel like you are running lightly over the ground, other days it feels like you are running through it – good days and bad days! Strangely, how you feel before the start of a race isn't always a good predictor of how you are going to feel in the race. So, what is it that results in the good days? Clearly fitness level, recent training, nutrition, energy level, footwear (or lack of it), terrain, weather, etc, may all contribute to how well you run. Even so, you can have two runs when all of the above are quite similar, but the outcomes are significantly different.

You can talk yourself into feeling tired without doing any obvious physical activity or conversely, shake off fatigue if you have the opportunity to do something you find enjoyable.

Psychological preparation for a training session or race should be an accepted component of that physical activity. As with the physical aspects of training, there is no magic formula that you can apply to your own psychological preparation. We are all different in what motivates us to subject ourselves to what is a demanding and uncomfortable activity – running at speed for considerable distances. That said, there are a few general guidelines.

Mood influences your ability to make the most of your physical attributes and the training outcomes that you have achieved. Focus on the positive, rather than the negative. Concentrate on what you do well. If things aren't going well, think about times when they have. It is good to have a few race experiences when you have felt really good about your achievement to look back on. It doesn't really matter if those memories get better each time you recall them. Nobody else will know what you are thinking. Even on a cold, wet and windy day you can still find something to be positive about – it need only be the thought of how good a hot breakfast is going to taste when you finish.

One of the objectives of a hard training session is to prepare for races and other training sessions. Confidence comes from placing a demand on your body and realising that you can sustain a performance and associated level of discomfort that you might previously have thought was not possible. Setting small, realistic incremental goals and achieving them reinforces a positive attitude towards responding to physical and mental demand. There is a lot of difference between, “I can't do that”, and, “I can't do that yet, but I soon will be able to”.

Focus on the things you can control. You can't control things like traffic on a route you need to take, the weather, the terrain, your competitor's ability, and, to varying degrees the other demands on your time and energy from work, family, relationships, etc. You can control little things like getting to training or a race with appropriate clothing and shoes and with plenty of time to change and warmup. Attention to little things can make an experience positive. Recognise that there will be times when things do not go as well as expected and take some time to think through what you could have done to improve them. Every experience presents an opportunity to learn something of value, you just have to ask yourself the question, “What have I learned from that?”

Looking at other competitors as role models is fine if what you gain from that are ways to improve your own performance. If you regularly race someone who is significantly faster than you are, setting a goal of reducing the difference in your times is an achievable and productive strategy.

Breaking a race distance up into smaller units, focussing on each in turn rather than the distance to the finish is a form of setting smaller achievable goals. It also contributes to your brain setting a higher “comfortable” pace than it otherwise might. Running at your target pace over the next kilometre is a lot more motivating than thinking of how far you still have to go.

Finally, focus on your running form. Keep an image of smooth, relaxed, fluid running in your head and you may be surprised at how the thought translates into action.