**Athletes and the power of the present moment**

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After 13 years of coaching and interacting with athletes I find that the biggest single hurdle for athletes is their mental approach to racing and training and, indeed more importantly, their attitude to life in general.

I find that athletes are type A personalities, very driven, very goal orientated and, for the most part, very anxious as well. There are exceptions to the rule but the mirror image to high performance is always some form of anxiety. Its almost a necessity to want to succeed in difficult goals (ie) in order to do this sport you need to be driven and I think this applies from age group athletes right through to elite professional athletes.

It is always difficult to broach the subject of psychology with athletes. There still seems to be some stigma attached to the words “mental health” and I think that’s a shame. Personally, I feel that psychology in sport and in the general population still has a long way to go and for athletes we have only just scratched the surface of what is possible with a good mental prep and psychological maintenance program.

Some of the biggest difficulties I see with athletes relate to their inability to exist for the present moment. I’ve seen so much angst by athletes who are mentally exhausted and don’t realise it. Mental exhaustion causes all sorts of problems from anxiety issues to clinical depression and immune dysfunction. I also believe that I have seen athletes and their supporters label depression as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome because, again the stigma that revolves around mental health always makes it a hard subject to broach with athletes.

One of the causes of mental exhaustion is that athletes have a preoccupation or habit of mentally labelling everything. How does that feel? How was that performance? Why didn’t I feel as good as last week? Oh this prep isn’t going the same way as the last one I did. The prep I did when I won was different and so on. There is a constant noise and there is a constant comparison of now against the past. Also, with athletes there is always a projection into the future. The cost of the above is always the loss of the present moment and the present is the only moment which is critical to performance and general wellbeing.

For instance when things go wrong with fluid intake or nutrition or pace – most of the time it’s not because there wasn’t a plan. Its more often than not, the athlete just starts obsessing over things that cannot be controlled – past / future / other competitors etc etc –  It is a constant mental labelling of everything that can get very exhausting during a race and detracts from focus because, simply put, focus is the present moment.  The interesting thing about the present is that it is a far more intelligent state for an athlete to use because with the present moment comes awareness, a far more powerful state, that in its purest form will not only bring you some calm headspace, but will bring you a better standard of performance because you will actually be present to make changes that actually effect your performance.

It’s a good little test to run on yourself – just check how much energy you use thinking about what has happened in the past or check to see how much time you spend thinking about the future. The big problem with the past and the future is that you are not actually in a state that exists at all. So think about that for second – how much focus, consciousness and presence can you bring to a thought pattern like that? How much closer will those thought patterns bring you to a great performance or a better training situation?

I once read a quote that I thought was brilliant and it read (“nothing ever happened in the past – It happened in the now – Echart Tolle”)  How perfectly true and how much we fight this one simple truth by living in some altered state. I can’t tell you how many times as a coach I have watched a talented athlete dwell on one bad result. I have seen athletes have great seasons and then have a bad result and turn a great season into something less in their minds by dwelling on one negative in a sea of positive. I call it the spiral. The place where an athlete will spiral downwards into a suffering hell of negatives that are based on nothing, and again, a non reality that has no basis of truth. In this state there is no connection to the present moment, there is no sense of real consciousness or focus. I sometimes marvel at a good athlete’s ability to see the negative side of their talent. A drive for better is great, but a thought of weakness or dwelling on certain aspects in a great athlete is very destructive. Again, once a negative spiral gets into place, it’s a hard nut to crack.

I always find it interesting that when people talk about focus they seem to think it’s some kind of mystic place that you go on a plane above mortal consciousness. To me this just creates confusion for athletes. Even Buddhists will tell you that meditation doesn’t take them away –it actually brings them into the present moment in a state of awareness and peace. A very aware, intelligent space it is for one simple reason – it is free of the mental chatter and negative self talk that we constantly feed ourselves. The constant labelling good and bad, right and wrong goes into the background and a clear focus comes into view.

So If I needed to summarise this for athletes where would I begin?

**“Where ever you are before a race, be there totally”** What does that mean? It means that whatever you do in the lead-up and during a race you must be in the present. Too many people live in the future or the past – even during a race (i.e.) They worry about things that have happened to them in the past or they worry about whether they might cramp later or blow-up or dehydrate and so on. Nothing that you think about in the future or the past can help you Now and the only real tangible thing that you actually have at all times is the present – presence is powerful, presence is real - You either choose to be present and in the now, or you choose to be lost in your thoughts and the “what ifs”.**“The only road to a good performance is - presence that takes place now”** your ability to stay with the moment at all times and not let your mind take control. If you can stay present and just live for the moment during a Race then anything is possible.

**Stay Calm:**

Absolutely critical in triathlon. Keep your mind calm and quite. Practise this. Everybody talks about positive thoughts but an even better option is to have no thoughts at all. It takes energy to have thoughts positive or negative. You need to set up a state of awareness – in this state you are aware of everything that is happening around you but you are not analysing whether it’s good or bad, you are just responding to events as they unfold, and that takes very little energy. It’s a state that some people call self confidence.

**Don’t judge every moment:**

Most of the mental chatter in your head during a race comes from judging and assessing how the race is going and whether it’s unfolding as you planned it. Again this is valuable energy that you can use to drive you forward. We can turn around even the worst of days out there, but this can only happen from a mind that is calm, quite, and free from the tendency to continually judge and analyse whats going on.

**Don’t hold back:**

If you hold back because you have fear of falling short of your goals then you are always going to be sorely disappointed. This is a massive problem even for world level pros. There are no guarantees in this life so don’t squander opportunities by holding back and not being present. There is a quote from sports psychology that I really like it and it reads – “people are scared of winning” I really think this is true. If you hold back that 10% then you will never achieve your goals but if you throw out your mental blocks then anything can happen and there’s a lot more satisfaction in knowing you gave it everything and fell short rather then fall short by holding back.

There was also an interesting quote from a big wave surfer called Laird Hamilton, when asked why he risks his life in the pursuit of massive waves he replied – “I don’t want to not live by worrying about what might or could happen”. What’s the punch line? – live in the now, and don’t obsess or waste energy over things you can’t control and above all don’t think about outcomes.

Lets take a worry thought for a moment, “what if I flat” basically you are projecting an imaginary future situation, and that creates fear. If you think about it logically there is no way you can deal with this situation because, in reality, it doesn’t actually exist. It’s a mental phantom that creates fear and fear is certainly not helpful before or during a Race. Instead of going down this road of fear and destructiveness, ask yourself  - “what problem do I have right now?” Not next year, not tomorrow, not in 5 minutes time – right Now –you’ll be amazed at what can happen if you can stay in that place.

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