

Mental Preparation for Your Spring Marathon: Part 2 (of 2)

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So your spring marathon training is clipping along quite nicely; the cherry blossoms are springing up on the trees; and the daffodils are doing their darndest to shoot up from the ground. And suddenly the awareness – or reality – of just how quickly your goal race date is approaching has come to the fore.

When thinking of your upcoming spring marathon, for some, the word ‘impasse’ may currently be looming in your head – as in, ‘my training is okay, but it seems that my motivation has hit an impasse’. There may be some folks who switch the order of the words ‘training’ and ‘motivation’, even.

Yet for others, the notions of itchy feet and contained excitement may be more appropriate at the moment. That’s right - you simply cannot wait to get out there and have a proper go at the treasured race distance that you’ve already trained several weeks and/or months for by now.

If you are like most people who have a goal and invest something of themselves into the process, then you will have had a bit of both the ‘impasse’ and ‘excitement’ sensations throughout your training, rest assured. That makes you normal – particularly given the recent UK cold snap.

What separates individuals who seem to have these moments or sensations at their (more) appropriate times – in contrast to those who never can quite ‘nail it’ – well, that’s often down to mental preparation. So if you’re in a lull, or finding the cold snap dull, take heart in the longer days to come, and read some tips below on how to snap *back*.

In the previous article of this two-part series, I noted practical tips for runners who want to nail it at just the right time – i.e., on the day of their spring marathon. Included in the preceding article were discussions related to ‘moments of truth’; appropriate types of goals; concentration and cues; imagery and utilization of ‘tangible’ items prior to and on race day; and, importantly, the need to incorporate mental preparation within physical training regimes.

That said, there’s no need to further preach about how important that facet is to your training – you already know that. However, there is considerable value in passing along new information to you.

In particular, let us consider the ‘what can I do from this point forward’ issue, as ‘now’ is precisely when and where *change* occurs. The current article focuses on change and controllable factors (i.e., what factors *can* vs. *cannot* be controlled), and combines research, practical, and personal resources.

Keep What Works – Ditch the Rest

How familiar does the following conversation sound to you?

Me: Why are we still doing (insert process or activity, here) this way?

Other: Because it's always been done that way.

Me: But that doesn't seem to be working any more.

Other: Well, that's just the way that it's always been done.

Me: Oh.

If you rated this as an '11' on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 10 is 'far too familiar'), then I urge you to think beyond 'Oh', and consider doing something about it. While most people could easily insert a process or activity related to work, social, and personal lives, let us not forget that many of us could do the same for our running and mental prep, too.

I am not suggesting that you throw the baby out with the bath water; instead, make sure that you keep what works, and ditch the rest. There is one primary point that I need to add to that idea: once you do ditch the rest, ensure that you try new and varied strategies to replace what you cut out from your old mental training regime.

A practical idea that might be useful would be to write down a list of the things that you have 'always done' when it comes to your running. In that list, include both physical and mental preparation aspects. If you find that you are struggling to include or identify mental preparation factors, therein might lay a good starting point. However, if you find that you have a few items (e.g., try to visualize/image the night before a race, but always fall asleep), then that would be quite a different starting point. The aim is to begin by identifying what does and does not work for you. As to what you can do after that point, read on.

Removing Psychological Barriers

Burt Giges, who is both a researcher and a long-time aficionado of running, wrote about removing psychological barriers (as cited in M. Andersen, *Doing sport psychology*, 2000). He emphasized the importance of first identifying barriers, and then exploring their meaning prior to initiating and ultimately creating change. According to Giges, people often create barriers that can be classified as cognitive (e.g., self-doubt); affective (e.g., guilt, shame); behavioural (e.g., overtraining); and, a lesser-known category, conative (i.e., relating to striving, such as low motivation).

If you quickly look back at what you've 'always done', consider how you might classify some of the psychological barriers that you may have discovered. Also of utmost importance, reflect on the techniques or strategies that you've always used that have been effective. An interesting tact might be to compare the 'always done' positive vs. negative items. Identify the times and consider the reasons you may have implemented a positive rather than a negative strategy when you're training and/or racing.

To illustrate how psychological barriers might work, let's look at one of the four types – cognitive – and relate it to your spring marathon mental preparation. Consider some word(s) that you tend to say to yourself frequently when training or racing goes sour. What do you say to yourself *while* the performance is going poorly – something that causes your running to plummet, or something that brings you back into the zone where you want to be? What about after the event? Would you be likely to self-denigrate, for example to call yourself “sluggish” – aloud and/or internally?

If your reflections lead you to realize that you may be more likely to emphasize what is bad about the performance and/or you, then Giges indicated that the next step would be to examine the meaning of the barrier. This step includes looking at the language (e.g., ‘I’ll never be good enough’); determining its impact (e.g., how strongly you believe it); and considering the context (e.g., do you feel this way about yourself generally, or just in sport). In other words, if we have enough information about what we do and say to ourselves, then we can begin to remove the barriers.

Relating this notion to your own current marathon preparation, you may have had setbacks in training or performed poorly in some of your recent gauge races. From your lists of what you’ve ‘always done’, I wonder if the items related to mental preparation would include ‘speak negatively to self after poor performances’. Possibly not, but if that is something that you do, then you can control that factor – hands down. And you can transfer that item on your psychological barriers list to your ‘always done: positives’ list, but it takes some practice and adjustment.

There are several useful techniques and strategies that runners can adopt – and, yes, they can be incorporated now – to begin transferring barriers or ‘always done: negatives’ to a positive framework within their marathon training.

In terms of factors that are controllable, a few that I can suggest include re-adjusting goals as and if necessary; working ‘smarter’ versus harder; and ensuring that you maintain your enthusiasm and focus, to ultimately follow-through with meeting your goal(s).

Re-adjusting Your Goal(s)

A primary challenge with goal setting for runners – particularly those who are prone to racking up mileage, utilizing spreadsheets, reveling in data, and can tell you at this moment what their heart rate is within ‘0.005’ of a beat – is knowing when the time has come to revise their goals. Believe you me when I tell you that I write of this ‘disorder’ with the utmost empathy (and half-watermelon smile).

Many runners keep on running, stick to their marathon training, run another one after they may have said something like ‘I’ll never run another one of those again’, because they like accomplishing the goal(s) attached to their running

experiences. And they'll be hornswaggled if they have to re-adjust their goal – after all, 'it's MY goal, and I set it, and I'm going to achieve it, come what may'.

The problem with that thinking is that sometimes our body is not as clear as our mind in this respect – and that may or may not be due to something that our state of mind has 'nudged' our body into doing that has, well, temporarily 'broken' it, for instance.

In J. Williams' (1998) book, *Applied Sport Psychology*, Gould wrote about how athletes can utilise goal setting for peak performance. In particular, he emphasised the importance of providing for goal evaluation, whereby individuals receive feedback about the ways that their present performance can be related to both short- and long-term season goals.

A practical consideration for coaches, outlined by Botterill (1983), is a goal-setting system that can be developed by implementation of three phases: planning, meeting (including setting times aside throughout the season), and the follow-up or evaluation phase – the latter of which can include goal achievement and performance evaluation cards.

These principles can easily translate into your personal goal setting system regarding your mental preparation for the marathon. For example, grab yourself a couple of large index cards – for posting them where you deem fit (e.g., bathroom mirror). Label them your 'goal achievement cards' and include useful information, maybe in the form of a chart, such as:

- your goals (e.g., "repeat cue word 'fluidity' to maintain my form" - process goal);
- ratings of how strong you think you are in each area at the moment (e.g., 2 (out of 10) – the goal is '8' for end of season);
- strategies for improvement (e.g., "repeat my cue word at the start of each 5K mark in the marathon");
- target dates for the achievements (e.g., "try in 10K race next week");
- sections for evaluation – NB: allow yourself to revise your goals as needed (e.g., "forgot to do it in the race! – will set alarms on watch for next long run"); & lastly,
- dates for re-visiting your goals to check your progress.

With some practical tips pocketed for strategizing in terms of making your goals work better for you, let's move on to the next controllable factor – working smarter.

Working 'Smarter' versus Harder

As you try to find training methods for the marathon that suit your needs– whether that's in terms of completing or repeating an attempt – most of us can't

get enough advice from coaches, exercise physiologists, and nutritionists. Many of the experts do support varied ideas of quality vs. quantity training.

I'd like to elaborate a bit on this notion of working 'smarter' vs. harder. In particular, take some time to reflect on how you could improve the way that you mentally prepare for your spring marathon and race. Consider avenues that you haven't gone down, yet, where you can work smarter.

In a recent paper by Rees, Ingledew and Hardy (2005), *Attribution in sport psychology: seeking congruence between theory, research and practice*, the authors addressed a once-hot topic of causal explanations, or understanding athletes' reasons for success and failure. Rees et al. urged the rejuvenation of this area of sport psychology, and particularly pointed to further exploration related to the issue of controllability. The paper highlighted the importance of athletes understanding what they attribute performance to, and recognizing controllable aspects of their performance across time and situations.

In practical terms, if you are a person who tends to perceive your success is due to ability and, thus, when you are unsuccessful the reason is because you 'aren't good enough', then chances are good that you can improve upon this way of thinking – i.e., by considering *change*, working smarter on your mental prep, and focusing on aspects that you can control. Particularly for individuals who deem ability to be an uncontrollable factor, attributing your performance to ability is not working smarter.

Similarly, if you are someone who is more likely to say that your success was due to lack of energy, then you may be traveling down a dangerous road. Giving more energy to your training and race performances is certainly preferable to thinking that 'you've either got it, or you don't', make no mistake. But according to Rees et al. (2005), recognizing and working to improve aspects related to control may be the best line to choose for athletes, particularly given the uncertain nature of competition conditions that your spring marathon may bring.

In other words, rather than expending energy on worrying about factors that you cannot control, expend energy on changing the factors that you can control.

Maintain Your Enthusiasm & Follow-thru

When trying to maintain your enthusiasm across any long-term training program – which may mean 12 weeks for some, and 12 years for others – the solution is, in part, an aspect of the problem. That is, when we lose excitement for long-term goals, to simply 'become enthusiastic' is not so easy. But remember that you were able to start the wheel of motivation turning in the right direction once, and you can do it again.

As for *how* to accomplish this feat, I refer to the basics. When you have moments of self-doubt (e.g., 'what was I thinking'), and are struggling to get out of bed for

that long training run that you know will have you outside on a cold morning for some time, recall *why* it is that you began to embark on the journey to begin with some weeks or months ago.

In an article published in the *American Psychologist* (Ray, 2004), the author cites a model of health and illness (i.e., the biopsychosocial model), that offers ideas as to how we view the rest of the world. According to Ray, the model identifies basic concepts to explain the way that individuals see much of the world – including the notion that as we change our minds (i.e., thoughts), we change our brains and therefore our bodies.

In a nutshell, to maintain your enthusiasm and see your marathon goal to its (happy) end, change your minds to fit the outcome that you aim to achieve. Look back in the ol' training log, and fill your mind with the memories of good runs, great races, and enthusiastic thoughts.

Final notes

In *The Sporting Bodymind*, Syer and Connolly (1987) write about the aim that most of you who are preparing for your spring marathon are hoping to achieve, i.e., an equilibrium between your body and mind. According to the researchers, human beings can make their body and mind partners.

In combination with the tools provided in Part I of this two-part article, I do hope that runners who have taken time to reflect, consider, and make room for change can do just that – enjoy the partnership between your mind and body on race day, when it counts and you want to 'nail it'.

Re-adjust your goals, if you need to. Change the aspects of your mental and physical training that are not working properly for you – and remember that what might have worked last year or 10 years ago, may not work this year. So work smarter, rather than harder, at tailoring your mental prep. Absolutely focus on what you can change and control. And if you start to wonder 'what's it all for', then please *do* wonder what it – i.e., the mental and physical preparation – is all about. You might just remember the origins of your excitement and, ultimately, give yourself that extra boost you need to meet your goals and race through that Finish Line.

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