Suzie Tuffey-Riewald, PhD, NSCA-CPT

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AUTHOR

Suzie Tuffey-Riewald received her degrees in Sport Psychology/ Exercise Science from the University of North Carolina —Greensboro. She has worked for USA Swimming as the Sport Psychology and Sport Science Director, and most recently as the Associate Director of Coaching with the USOC where she worked with various sport national governing bodies (NGBs) to develop and enhance coaching education and training. Suzie currently works as a sport psychology consultant to several NGBs.

Endurance Sports FAQs

As a former distance runner, I was excited about writing a column for this Endurance Sports issue. Over several weeks, I generated a long list of potential topics but struggled in choosing one topic as they all seemed relevant. So, instead of choosing only one topic, I have opted to address several. The topics discussed below represent the more common questions asked by endurance sport athletes and coaches (Be sure to email mindgamescolumn@nsca-lift.org if you have a question of your own that wasn't addressed).

"I know imagery can be valuable in preparing for a competition. But, how can I use it for a triathlon where the competition lasts over 2 hours?"

Yes, it would be tough to effectively visualize (see, feel, experience) the entire 2-hour race. It would be quite a time commitment and quite a test of your mental fortitude. Most athletes would lose their focus within a few minutes and give up—which would be unfortunate as imagery can be a very effective tool (as you recognize). Think about using imagery in a different way than say a gymnast, diver or athlete who is executing a specific skill in a short period of time may use it. For an endurance athlete, visualizing the entire competition is probably not necessary. Instead, identify the critical moments, phases or sections of the race. Then, visualize these "snapshots of the competition" to facilitate your preparation and performance. The transition from swimming to cycling, the hill at the end of the run or managing the mass start in the swim are examples of critical parts of a race to focus on and prepare for—use imagery to help you do so.

"The cyclists I work with love competing but their motivation in daily training is up and down. What can I do to help? If they gave a more consistent effort in practice I know it would help performance."

It is nice that you are thinking about what you can do (as opposed to leaving it all up to the athlete) as motivation is a function of the person and the environment. There are, in fact, some things you might be able to do to enhance their motivation. A couple suggestions:

Give purpose to each practice session by clearly communicating how the work you are asking them to do will translate to enhanced performance. You know the "why's" behind the training session but it may not be evident to the cyclist so help them see the rationale to enhance their effort and motivation.

Have each athlete set daily training goals related to what she needs to work on to improve riding performance. Depending on the athlete, these goals may be set by the individual or it may be more effective for you to identify the goals.

Be creative—the same workload can be accomplished in a variety of ways; work to "spice up" training rides to keep things fresh.

Talk to the athletes about the intensity they bring to training on a daily basis. Communicate to them the importance of a strong effort and brainstorm as a group ways to facilitate their daily motivation and intensity.

"Is it best to distract myself so I don't think about the pain?"

First, let's refer to what you are feeling as discomfort which has a more positive connotation than pain. Second, to answer your question, it depends. Let me explain. Both dissociative attentional strategies (purposefully distracting oneself as you are talking about) and associative attentional strategies (attending to bodily functions and feelings) have been found to be effective. Furthermore, athletes have reported using both strategies in practice and in competition. In part, the strategy you opt for will be influenced by your objective. It is recommended that athletes looking to stick to an exercise program should use dissociative strategies (listen to music, talk with a friend while running, put together a mental to-do list) to make the exercise more enjoyable. If, for example, you are exercising to manage your weight, distracting yourself from the discomfort is an effective strategy. Alternately, use of associative strategies (attending to breathing rate, awareness of muscle tension or fatigue) tends to be correlated with faster running performance. Given that both strategies are effective, strive to develop both strategies and determine the situations where each is most effective so you can implement them purposefully. ■