

Assessing Your Mental Fitness

By Marvin Zauderer

[PezCyclingNews.com/October 2008]

With a season break upon many of us, and base-building ahead, this is primetime for taking stock of mental fitness. How – and how well – did you apply your mental skills this past year? Which skills are strong, and how will you use them going forward? Which skills need work, and how will you strengthen them? Improving your mental fitness can be the key to more fun, fulfillment, and results in your cycling.

Lance Armstrong, in his book “It’s Not About the Bike,” writes:

There is a point in every race when a rider encounters his real opponent and understands that it's himself.

His coach Chris Carmichael, in their book “The Lance Armstrong Performance Program,” writes:

What's the critical difference between athletes who succeed and athletes who go home empty-handed? Those who succeed have blended the mental aspects necessary for success into their physical training programs.

And in [her guest column](#) on Pez last week, this year's National Road and Criterium Champion [Brooke Miller](#) identifies her biggest strength as a cyclist:

I train hard. I like to think that I have some physical talents - but I will tell you, without hesitation, my head is my biggest strength.... it has been my new approach to racing from the mental perspective that has made the biggest and most sudden change in my career.

In your cycling, how much of a strength – or weakness, or both – is your head?

For many of us, this is a time for taking stock (and maybe for papering our walls with it, unfortunately); a time of self-reflection and setting intentions. The ten-day Jewish observance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the month-long Muslim observance of Ramadan, have both recently concluded. (For those of you who have just experienced those holidays, don't worry; I'm not going to suggest another fast.) In Ayurveda, India's 5000-year-old natural system of medicine, this is the time of year for the transition from our *Pitta* to our *Vata* energy, a time for the rebalancing that is central to the ayurvedic system. And of course, this time before fall/winter base-building is often a perfect break – sort of a Sabbath, continuing with the spiritual theme – for taking stock of our cycling as well.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched arm-in-arm with Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Selma Civil Rights March, called the Sabbath “a palace in time.” And the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew origin of the word “sabbath” comes from the word “rest” and also the word “cease.” How can you take a break from your cycling in a way that is restorative, rejuvenating, and focuses you clearly on the year ahead? And what might you need to cease?

In the last several weeks, my colleagues [Josh Horowitz](#), [Bruce Hendler](#), [Matt McNamara](#), and [Stephen Cheung](#) have skillfully covered many topics in our Toolbox series on the off-season. So let's add to their guidance by focusing on the mental side of your “palace in time.” Let's check in on your use of a few of [the five core mental skills](#), some of the Integral Elements of those skills, and some of the advanced mental skills of the mentally fit cyclist.

Using and Strengthening Your Core (Skills)

To begin, let's look at your **goal-setting and goal-management** over the past year. Did you set

goals for yourself at the beginning of the year? If not, you may be missing out on an important tool for setting direction, for regulating your effort and rest, and for having more tangible experiences of progress and success.

If you did set goals, which of them – the ones that remained relevant – did you achieve? Which new goals that you set during the season did you achieve? What other skills did you build, progress did you make, satisfaction did you gain, fun did you have? Did you get the most you could out of all of your experiences?

Back in my high-tech days at Apple, I was asked to make a presentation to the CEO and his staff. I was nervous, rehearsed repeatedly, and when the time came, my boss came with me. After the presentation, he said to me, “That was great. Now, the three things you need to do better next time are....” Wait a minute, I thought, can you go back to the “that was great” part for a minute? Some of us focus too much on what needs to be improved, and not enough on what’s already...enough. Take a minute to feel good about what may seem obvious: you set goals this past year, and you achieved them. You made progress. You had fun!

It’s a good thing to set goals, and an even better thing to manage yourself to them effectively. How well did you do that? Were your goals specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound? Did you reset your goals when needed? How was your follow-through? Did cycling have the right role and place in your life throughout the season?

Now’s the time to begin work on your goals for next season. Remember to include not only *outcome goals* (eg. “finish with the pack in all races,” “complete my first century,” “improve TT power by 20 watts”) but also *process goals* (eg. “maintain good form and attitude whenever I’m dropped on a climb”). Check out [the article on goal-setting](#) for more tips. And with all of this emphasis on goal-directed behavior, please don’t forget: rest and recovery are where the training adaptations happen. Sometimes you can get further by letting go.

Speaking of attitude, how was yours this past season? What attitude did you have *toward yourself* when you were succeeding, and when you were struggling? The way you talked to yourself, the thoughts you had, the way you coached yourself...did it ever remind you of someone else? Strong voices in life often stay with us.

Thoughts affect feelings, and feelings affect thoughts. The way you talk to yourself – your **self-talk** – plays a critical role in your self-confidence, your emotions, and your focus. Take a hard look at your self-talk. Were you too hard on yourself at times? Are you letting yourself off the hook too often? When? **Effective self-talk** begins with **self-awareness**: noticing how you’re coaching yourself, and under what circumstances. If – and that’s a big if – you notice negative self-talk, you can stop it, and even replace it if need be.

If you see room for improvement in your self-talk, vow to work on it this year. Make improving your self-talk a goal not only for the year, but for specific rides or races. You deserve to be challenged in your cycling, and you also deserve compassion and respect. Set your intention to treat yourself that way.

Let’s look at **managing emotions** next. (C’mon, guys, it’s not just the ladies who have feelings.) Here’s Brooke Miller again:

In the past, I was not confident enough to take control of a race. I realize that I had been afraid of what might happen if I took a risk, attacked too early, too hard -- afraid that I would blow up or lead out the other sprinters: Afraid of big risk and big reward.

Fear. Anxiety. Anger. Sadness. Depression. Are your emotions contributing to or detracting from your performance? How effectively do you manage your emotions on and off the bike?

Looking forward for a moment, there are days of less light and worse weather coming.

Particularly if you depend on your cycling to help you maintain your mood, what do you need to do to avoid the [Cyclist's Winter Blues?](#) It's important to have a plan now, especially if you need some time to acquire some of the trappings of winter cycling (trainer, DVDs, training partners, podcasts, Sudoku books....).

In my work with athletes from all sports, anxiety and its siblings – fear, nerves, and the like – are the most pervasive obstacles to success and satisfaction. As you look back on your year, what have you been afraid of, if anything, in your cycling? What's the worst that could happen? How likely is that, honestly? What makes you more vaguely anxious in your cycling? What takes the edge off of that?

It's certainly wise for you to assess whether you can [manage the anxiety family](#) (or any other emotion) more effectively. Effective self-talk and [breathing techniques](#) are only two of the skills that may help you with that. But here's a more subtle point: what can you do to keep the fear/anxiety from coming up, or coming up as often/intensely, in the first place? Here are some ideas:

- From whom, if anyone, do you get emotional [pressure](#) in your cycling? Can you reduce that in some way? Do you need to improve your [communication skills](#) in order to accomplish this? (Or maybe just by wading into these emotional waters, *that's* the way to improve your communication skills!)
- From whom do you get emotional support? Do you need more? Do you need to ask?
- [Building self-confidence](#) and [increasing connectedness with others](#) are often the most common routes to reducing fear and anxiety – in any aspect of life. If need be, think about how you can follow those routes more purposefully next season.

Heschel writes, "There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord." I wish you a relaxing break from which you emerge clearer, stronger, and ready to take on the challenges – inner and outer – of the coming year.



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