

# Concentration

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Making or missing the move. Attacking at the right moment or hesitating. Avoiding a crash or being caught up in it. Often, the key in these cycling situations – and many others that you're likely to face – is concentration. Maintaining, shifting, and regaining your focus could make the difference between falling short of your goals and reaching them.

Last month, I explored [Managing Emotions](#), the third of the [five core skills of mentally fit athletes](#). This month, I look at Concentration in more depth.

Allow me to get intergalactic briefly. (Thanks.) In each moment, we can consciously choose – if necessary – where we place our attention. The more our attention is uncluttered by unneeded distractors, the more we can be fully present. And the more present we are, the more likely we are to be connected to everything within ourselves – strength, skill, experience – that we can bring to each moment of a ride or race. So, the more strongly we're connected to ourselves, the more likely we are to be in the “zone,” what [Mihály Csíkszentmihályi](#) calls the *flow* of optimal performance.

(OK, I'm landing now.) In cycling, sometimes we maintain our focus naturally; it flows without us having to work at it. At other times, we lose focus and have to regain it, or we have to shift focus – for example, from a rhythmic climbing tempo to an attack – to be successful. Concentration, then, is the process of attending closely to internal or external *cues*: thoughts, feelings, sensations, the weather, the hottie in the feed zone. If you lose concentration, you may miss an opportunity, waste energy, or waste time. If you maintain concentration, you maximize what you're bringing to each moment of your ride or race, increase your ability to respond quickly and effectively to unexpected events, and increase your ability to initiate decisions on the bike.

Many of us mental training types base our work with athletes in this area on [Bob Nideffer's](#) work. His research shows that every athlete's optimal focus style has two dimensions: *width* and *direction*. A *narrow* focus is on a single point: your anxiety level, breathing, pedal stroke, the wheel in front of you. A *broad* focus is a panoramic view: your bodily sensations, your self-talk, the weather, the pack. And as you can see from these examples, the direction of your focus can be *internal* or *external*. Since there are four unique combinations of the two dimensions, there are four focus styles.

## 6 Steps to Improve Your Concentration

Your second step in assessing and improving your concentration on the bike is to **determine your focus style**. To do that, you have to take the first step: you need to **know when you're focused**. During your next several training rides, try devoting part of the ride to observing yourself. Notice when you feel focused, and remember everything you can about the sensation. Is it a lack of thoughts? A single thought? A feeling? A sensation of being consumed by driving power into the pedals? After each ride, jot a few words down that describe or evoke the sensation.

Remember Mr. Miyagi, the wise karate teacher in *The Karate Kid*? (It's OK if you admit seeing the movie. Really.) Each time he observes his student, Daniel-san, getting distracted (usually by a pretty girl) during training, he says, “Steady....concentrate. Focus power.” The third step in improving your concentration on the bike is to **define your recurring distractors**. On those same training rides, or on different rides if need be, notice when you *lose* focus. What's the catalyst? Something internal, like a thought (eg. “I'm gonna get dropped”), a feeling such as anger or anxiety, or a sensation that your performance is decreasing? Something external, like a

bug, another rider, or a mechanical problem? And how were you feeling just before the distractor appeared? Tired? Anxious? Focused? As you jot notes in your training log over time, identify your 3-5 top recurring distractors, and any patterns you notice in how you're feeling just before the distractors snag you.

The fourth step is to **strengthen your basic concentration skills**. You can do this by:

- Continuing to monitor and jot notes periodically about your focus, and lack of focus, on your training rides.
- Regularly take a brief, all-senses inventory during the experience of feeling completely focused. This can contribute to your *automaticity*: becoming more naturally and continuously focused, a kind of “muscle memory” of concentration.
- Just as you (may) have physical intervals in training, create concentration intervals. Define a specific period of time – 30 seconds, a minute, 5 minutes, 30 minutes – and maintain a competition-level focus during that time. Recover as needed, then do another. Experiment with the number and duration of these intervals. Log a few notes after your ride.
- Build awareness of the focus cues – whether they're internal or external, narrow or broad -- that work well for you.
- Debrief yourself, or do so with a coach or mental training consultant, after races or important rides.
- Consider experimenting with any form of meditation or mindfulness. Meditation and mindfulness traditions have been helping people build self-awareness, focus, and concentration for thousands of years. [Jon Kabat-Zinn's](#) and [Eugene Gendlin's](#) materials are good starting places.

The fifth and sixth steps in your quest to improve concentration are to **create a refocusing plan for each of your top distractors** and to **create a pre-ride or pre-race focusing routine**. Some tips:

- [Effective goal-setting](#) can create excellent targets for focusing, refocusing, or shifting focus.
- [Positive self-talk](#) is one of the strongest tools you have. Self-talk can direct your attention quickly, and it can strengthen your attention with the positive feelings it generates.
- Speaking of (and definitely not singing about) feelings, we're more likely to lose focus when our old friends anxiety, fear, stress, tension, or worry are hanging around. So, your plans may include what you've learned about [managing anxiety](#) on and off the bike. More than likely, at least some of your recurring distractors will have less power over you if you're better at managing the anxiety they trigger, if you're less stressed to begin with, or both.
- For many of us, the most powerful group of anxiety-triggers on the bike, and thus the most powerful group of distractors, is *adversity*. And one of the leading sources of adversity on the bike is pain – not from injury, but from exertion, struggle, and fatigue. Notice in training how your attitude toward pain may make it harder or easier to deal with. (In an upcoming article, I'll cover the topic of pain in detail.)

Optimal performance flows atop the river of concentration. As you build this critically important mental skill, you eliminate barriers between your potential and the challenge of the road ahead. Mr. Miyagi, may he rest in peace, would be proud.



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