

Managing Your Will to Succeed

By Marvin Zauderer

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In cycling, you're constantly confronted with a choice of whether or not – and how much – to apply your will. When do you attack, and when do you let the race come to you? When do you push (too) hard in a workout, and when do you skip it? The mentally fit cyclist strives for the right combination of exerting control and letting go.

In last month's Sport Psychology column, I continued our series on **Integral Elements**, the building blocks of the mentally fit cyclist's five core skills, by describing how increasing your **Self-Awareness** can help you improve your mental fitness. This month, I explore how your cycling can improve when you effectively manage your will to succeed.

For the article **The Mind of a Mentally Fit Pro**, I asked pro cyclist **Ben Jacques-Maynes** about experiences that have improved his mental fitness. Coming off his best season ever – he finished 2nd in the overall NRC standings for 2007 – Ben reflected on a fundamental change he's made in his approach to cycling:

“Another factor is my view on doping in sport. I've had money taken from me and results taken from me by people who have later tested positive. So that, too, has reduced my 'win at all costs' mentality that I might have had. It has lessened my drive to 'win, win, win' and made it more about 'what can I do.' My overall satisfaction is tied more to what comes from me, and the satisfaction has increased because I know it's coming from me. When all the mental struggle and striving comes through, it helps the confidence that I have in the next race and the next. It's going to help me be there for my kids after I retire.”

Of course, Ben hasn't completely let go of his will to win. He's just no longer letting it dominate him. Using an aspect of cycling that he couldn't control – doping by competitors – as a catalyst, Ben redirected some of his will toward something over which he has much more control: his own preparation, effort, and definition of satisfaction. Rather than trying so hard to control the *outcome*, he's focusing more on the *process*. And the outcome's getting better. In examining how to work with your will, let's first investigate what it is. Is it intention? Desire? Power? Control? The desire for power and control?

This week, my eldest daughter told me that she's getting into **Nietzsche** in a big way. (She's a college student, so I guess I ought to expect her to fall for a philosopher.) Nietzsche. Now there's a guy who was very clear on the concept of will. In his book **Beyond Good and Evil**, he wrote, “life simply is will to power.” To Nietzsche, the need to express our will underlies all of human behavior. As he saw it, acting on one's will is the motivation for – and goal of – life itself.

Well, I guess that makes the oft-heard phrase “s/he has control issues” a bit less derogatory.

In any case, moving more to the left (or is it the right?) of Nietzsche, consider the view of the eminent psychologist **Carl Rogers**. Rogers **defined “the good life”** as “a process, not a state of being,” in which a person constantly strives to achieve his/her full potential, fueled by an inner “actualizing tendency.” To Rogers, all of us have that natural force within us that propels us toward growth. And as we move closer to reaching our potential, we're more able to be *in* each moment of our experience rather than working too hard to make it be something different.

Hmmm. “Working too hard to make it be something different.” We'll get back to that shortly. Let's look at how managing and directing your will – to succeed, to grow, to improve – is an integral element of the mentally fit cyclist's five core skills: Goal-Setting, Concentration, Communication, Effective Self-Talk, and Managing Emotions.

Will and The 5 Core Skills

(Note: I'm assuming that you have all the will you need. If you don't, you can check out [the article](#) on sustaining motivation.)

1. Goal-Setting. Setting and managing goals effectively, [as I've explained in another article](#), can contribute profoundly to your cycling performance, enjoyment, and satisfaction. But too much of a focus on (future-oriented) *outcome goals* – winning this, finishing faster than that – can take your attention too far away from what's going on right now. Take care not to grasp your outcome goals too tightly, and use *process goals* (e.g., “whenever I get dropped on a climb, I'm going to focus on riding within myself and maintaining good form”) to redirect and channel your will.

It's also important to evaluate – and change, if necessary – your overall definitions of satisfaction and success. Ben didn't eliminate winning from his definition, he just broadened the definition to include his effort and improvement. Chungliang Ai Huang and Jerry Lynch, in their book "Thinking Body, Dancing Mind" say this about winning:

*“...the outcome of any event is important, but not as an end in itself. Keeping score enables you to measure your performance level throughout the event and get an indication of how you are progressing over a period of time. And it's fun to win. But being free of the **need** to win results in greater personal power and performance. Let the possibility of winning keep you alert and sharp. If you win, terrific; if not, feel the joy and satisfaction of having participated. Focus on how well you are mastering specific skills. Notice how the event provided you with an opportunity to display your skills against challenging competition. Win or lose, you have to dig down inside and discover other aspects of your essence. Prizes and victories are transitory, while outstanding performances, regardless of the outcome, are tremendously rewarding.”*

2. Concentration. As I noted in [the article on this skill](#), there are many ways to increase your ability to focus. But what about being *overfocused*? When you're applying too much of your will to concentration, you could be mesmerized by the wheel in front of you, have a death grip on the bars, or could be applying so much force to your calming mantra (ironic, isn't it?) that you miss a chance to join a break. Be present, not overbearing. Use [breathing techniques](#) and [effective self-talk](#) to keep yourself centered: unaffected by potential distractions, and with no need to use an increase in willfulness to create an illusion of solidity.

3. Communication. When communication doesn't go well, or when we think it's not going to go well, we tend to revisit our old friends in the anxiety family: we get anxious, stressed, worried, afraid, or tense. And what tends to follow closely on the heels of the anxiety family? Control. We withdraw, interrupt, accuse, blame, judge, yell; all these are examples of overexerting our will. And that makes it harder to communicate. If you manage your discomfort well enough, though, you'll tend to rein in your will and [communicate more effectively](#), whether it's with your teammates, coach, competitors, family, or friends. And improved communication often leads to improved performance.

4. Effective Self-Talk. Recall from [the article on self-talk](#) the kind of cycling that we don't like: the anxiety family fuels negative self-talk (“I'm a lousy climber,” “I'm not going to finish in the front group, so it's not worth finishing at all,” “I suck!”), which creates more anxiety, which fuels more negative self-talk. As Bart Simpson would say, *Ay caramba!*

Take another look at those examples of negative self-talk. Very powerful statements, right? There it is again: responding to anxiety by exerting (too much) control. There are better uses for your will than beating yourself up. Aim it at stopping or replacing the negative self-talk, and at the additional tools you have for reducing on- and off-the-bike stress.

5. Managing Emotions. Back to Carl Rogers. Why might we be “working too hard” to make our moment-to-moment experience different? You guessed it: the anxiety family again. Or perhaps

emotions like anger, frustration, guilt, and sadness. When we feel troubled, we tend to want to fix it, and in the first way that our brain thinks of to try (even if we don't notice what it's thinking). Sometimes that works well. But at other times we're too quick to apply our considerable will. You can be emotional; you're not expected to be a robot. But if you [tolerate and manage your emotions](#) on the bike effectively, you won't need to overcompensate with willfulness.

I was talking with my wise friend, Lloyd, this week on our regular Wednesday group ride. We started talking about our recent races, and the conversation shifted (as it so often does) to what we're learning about ourselves in those races. As countless off-the-bike philosophers have observed, managing our will is not always easy. After all, we depend on it, and it serves us so well at times. But as we discussed the issues of will, control, and letting go, that old Buddhist saying came to mind: "Our greatest strength is our greatest weakness."

As you develop more [self-awareness](#) – one of the other Integral Elements of the five core skills – you'll be better able to sort out what's going on with your will, and to detect opportunities to rein it in and redirect it. It's about knowing when to make things happen... and when to let things happen. It's about when to act from a place of confidence... and when to let go from that very same place.



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