

The Mind of a Mentally Fit Pro

By Marvin Zauderer

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What does it take – mentally – for professional cyclists to be successful in a stage race like the Tour of California? What can the rest of us mere mortals learn from their experiences? Pez talks candidly with **Katheryn Curi Mattis**, **Steven Cozza**, and **Ben Jacques-Maynes**, and hears some surprising and inspiring stories.

Today, in a special Tour of California edition of our sport psychology column, we take a temporary detour from [our series of articles](#) on Integral Elements, the building blocks of the mentally fit cyclist's five core skills. We discussed mental fitness with three of the finer people in the pro pelotons:

- **Katheryn Curi Mattis** was the Elite National Road Champion in 2005. In 2006 she was slowed by a life-threatening injury, but came back stronger than ever in 2007, when she had a breakthrough season. She finished third at Redlands and at the Tour Cycliste Féminin International Ardeche – her first GC podium in a Euro stage race – and helped the [Webcor Builders Women's Professional Cycling Team](#) to the #1 NRC ranking. Although she had to miss yesterday's inaugural [Tour of California Women's Criterium](#) because of race commitments in Australia, she is in the running for a spot on the 2008 USA Olympic team. She has two degrees in psychology and has a particular interest in the mental side of sport.

- **Steven Cozza** of [Team Slipstream](#) also had a breakthrough season in 2007. Having won the U-23 National Time Trial Championships in 2005, Steven had begun to [steadily develop his skills](#) in the pro peloton, but then [crashed heavily](#) in the rainy stage 3 – 72 of 139 starters DNFed – of the 2007 Tour of Picardie. After rising to the challenge of an arduous recovery process, 22-year-old Steven was named the Best Young Rider at the [Tour of Missouri](#), and then scored his first victory as a professional in [Stage 6](#) of the Vuelta a Chihuahua. He's racing this week in the Tour of California.

- **Ben Jacques-Maynes**, Team Leader of the [Bissell Pro Cycling Team](#), is also racing in the Tour of California, and he, too, had a terrific 2007. He scored numerous wins and top-5 results, and ultimately finished second in the overall NRC standings. He credits his mental fitness – built in part on his relationships with his wife, Goldi, and his kids, [Chase](#) and [Chloe](#) – as a significant contributor to his recent success.

Pez: Which mental skills have been most important for you in stage races?

Katheryn: A lot of it is confidence: knowing that I'm coming into the race having done everything I need to do to do my best. I know I can't control everything, and there are so many variables: the weather, crashes, etc. I make sure I've done what I can do. I study the course, evaluate my competition, eat well, and talk with my teammates and director about the game plan, particularly the goals for the race and for individual stages.

If I'm spending mental energy thinking, "my legs feel so bad," or "I really shouldn't have eaten that box of doughnuts," that takes away from being relaxed. If I get tense, or I'm paying attention to things I don't need to attend to, or I'm worrying about stuff, it pulls energy from me. The rides when I feel the best – it's effortless. On those rides, I wasn't distracted by anything, I wasn't thinking about anything else.

When I'm having a bad day on the bike, I try not to beat myself up about it. I'm mindful of it instead – "OK, you're hurting" – and can be OK with it. I use a mental checklist: I ask myself, "What's going on here, and what can I do about it?" I have phrases that I say to myself, like

“C’mon, Kat, get your head in the game,” or “Breathe!”

Steven: What’s most tough about a stage race like the Tour of California is that it’s *long*. It’s challenging to stay focused and stay alert. You’re getting tired, and it can be really frustrating: some guys are stronger at the beginning, and some guys are stronger at the end. You have to be careful not to say to yourself, “Ugh, we have another five-hour ride today.” I try to live in the moment, and take every stage like it’s a one-day race.

The Tour of California is nerve-wracking for me because it’s so close to home, and it’s my first race of the year. Through the season, I’m doing 60-100 races, and it eventually becomes second nature, just like going to work. But for me, the important thing to work on in this first race is self-doubt and negative thoughts. For me, positive affirmations overpower the negative thoughts – I use a trigger word or phrase. For example, before a tough climb, I’ll say to myself, “it’s going to be an aggressive climb.” I’m so psyched that I don’t care how hard it is. I’ve found this really helped before the cobble climbs in Belgium – it’s a battle, guys are bumping arms, and there’s an insane amount of pain. My director would say to me, “there’s an aggressive section coming up.” Now I do that for myself.

Ben: The biggest thing that has helped me is confidence in my preparation. I know I’ve done what I needed to do, regardless of how I’m going at that time.

There’s a bit of a gamble to racing – whether it’s on an actual win, or losing a minute on GC. As long as I feel I’ve given it everything I had, I’m satisfied.

In a stage race, you have to stay tippy-top mentally, because there’s almost always a next day. Even if you give it everything and perform above expectations on one day, you still have the next stage(s) to go. I try to limit my mental “amplitude” during any one stage – I try to remain as calm as possible to preserve the mental energy that I’ll need for the next stage or a specific moment in a stage.

During last season there was a stage race where I knew I wasn’t on good form. I tried to ride anonymously for the first couple of stages. Then it came to the time trial, and I got into the race. Something new came over me. I ended up getting 2nd in the time trial and 3rd overall. It’s not a “decision” in that case to turn on the internal fortitude. It comes on unconsciously; something inside of me wants the race. I just ride the wave. It’s like the first drop on a roller coaster.

In the stages I’ve won, the opportunities just present themselves rather than me planning for them. My confidence in my preparation, and this “mental Zen” I’m describing, maximizes what I have to throw down when those opportunities arise.

It helps me to have faith in a great team and to have faith that things are going to work out. Three-quarters of the time, the stars don’t align. When they do, I’m thinking about the times that they do. I remember those times and draw on them.

Pez: Which mental skills have been challenging for you? How have you been trying to improve?

Katheryn: Concentration. I get distracted by “shiny objects” and other people. To improve, I’ve been paying more attention to my body – what’s going on in my body. Yoga breathing has been phenomenal – it’s helped me to center myself.

Steven: Confidence. It’s a huge thing in cycling. I was even told by some people, “consider a career change.” You can improve so much by believing in yourself. You can say, “I *should* be at the front of the race, I *should* be top 5.” You don’t have to be cocky, but if you’re not confident, you don’t stand a chance. You’ve got to believe in yourself.

Ben: The ability to distract myself is very important. When I come home from a hard training ride, my son wants to sit on my lap and have me read him a book. At that point, after a recovery shake and a quick bite to eat, cycling goes out the window. It's a big mental change, and I've been getting used to it over the past 2-1/2 years since my son was born. I don't have time to think, "it was a bad ride," or "have I done enough hard work?" For some guys, their mind is still racing after a ride, literally and figuratively. I've seen a huge advantage in not being a bike racer 24/7. When you're constantly stable, you can reach the place you need to reach in every race. I've been able to replicate my "mental Zen" in nearly every race, regardless of how I was going physically.

I've also become less wrapped up in arbitrary goals – winning this, placing in that. I'm not going to be totally broken up if I don't win. I'm focused more on giving it my best.

Pez: What's an experience you've had that has contributed significantly to your mental fitness?

Katheryn: In 2006 I had an accident – I was hit by another cyclist. I broke 9 ribs, my collarbone, and spent five days in the hospital. It took me a long time to be able to learn from it. I had come off a year in '05 when I had won Nationals, and then I had this major setback. I couldn't do anything for six weeks. As a lifelong athlete, I felt stripped of my identity. It forced me to take a deep breath, say "it's not the end of the world," and reset my goals. I had tended to set my goals too high. I spent a lot of time at the end of the year talking with my coach, [Laura Charameda](#), about how to get my head back in the game. Also, my dad was diagnosed with cancer, and one of my best friends died on a training ride. I was close to quitting. I said, "OK, Katheryn, you're not ready to give up on this because you haven't accomplished everything you want to accomplish." I learned so many skills from that experience that now help me get through stage races. February 14th was the 2-year anniversary of my accident, and I'm so grateful to have learned so much since then.

Steven: Last year was the biggest for me. I had a crash where I landed on my head, and it took me three months to come back. I had crashed many times before, but this time I had post-traumatic stress, and I had never had that. I had to overcome my fears. After I recovered from that, I had the best couple of months of racing in my life.

Ben: I grew up as a MTBer, and it was always about going as hard as you could for the whole race. You needed mental toughness, bike-handling skills, and putting forth a consistent and hard effort from start to finish.

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.

Next Steps on Building Mental Fitness

How can you use what these pros have learned? Notice that:

- The core mental skills of [Goal-Setting](#), [Self-Talk](#), [Managing Emotions](#) (especially fear/stress/anxiety), [Concentration](#) and [Communication](#) have been important for all three pros.
- Something as elemental as [Breathing Technique](#) has been of great importance to Katheryn.

- How [Increasing Tolerance for Suffering](#) has been a difference-maker for Steven.
- How important [Recovering from Injury](#) has been for Katheryn and Steven.
- How Ben has come to appreciate the value of [giving cycling the right role in life](#).

If you haven't already, consider reading the Pez articles on these topics (just click on the words written in blue above), evaluate whether you could benefit from some work on any of those skills, and use the tips and links in the articles to add mental skills training to your physical training program. Your mind – and body – will thank you.



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