

Setting and Challenging Limits

By Marvin Zauderer

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We discover our potential – as athletes and as human beings – by challenging (what appear to be) our limits. Yet sometimes we're hesitant to challenge ourselves. And at other times, we're not hesitant enough. The skill of setting, knowing, and effectively challenging limits is an improvable, integral element of every cyclist's mental fitness.

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 identifying ways you can **build your self-confidence** as a cyclist. This month, I explore Setting and Challenging Limits, an important part of every athlete's mental fitness.

What comes to mind when you think about limits? Your **maximum steady state power**? That 21% climb that you can't yet master? The amount of time you can be on the bike before your significant other starts to complain? (Or, is it your high school pre-calculus class, your radar detector, and Maxwell Smart's Cone of Silence?)

When you think about your limits as a cyclist, how do you feel? Stressed? Defeated? Motivated?

Some athletes don't push on their limits nearly as hard as they could. They are content – or sad – to stay at a certain level of comfort. That might be exactly the right decision, or they might be missing an opportunity, or both. Think about this for a minute. What's true for you?

There are also those who push too hard on limits: their own, or others'. Sometimes, it's an honest mistake, made from what one might call a "strong place": with the genuine intention to grow as an athlete and with no undue risk to self and others. (As poet T.S. Eliot said, "*Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.*") But at other times, pushing too hard on limits might come from a weak place: from a desire to shore something up in oneself, from being blinded by an out-of-control desire for success, or from a desire to have power over others.

The experience of challenging and redefining your limits – to see how much your body and mind can do, to see how much you can achieve, to see what your potential is – can be exhilarating, terrifying, depressing, and just plain fun. How you think and feel about your limits – and about testing them – might be influenced by a number of interrelated factors, including:

- **Modeling and messages.** Reflect on this: What messages have you received – growing up in your family, through watching sports, from coaches, from significant others – about limits? Was effective limit-setting and risk-taking modeled well for you? What kinds of boundaries did your parent(s) and siblings have with you? Were you able to do anything you wanted, so that you had little or no experience with boundaries? Were you completely micromanaged, so that your experience with boundaries was utterly oppressive? (and probably depressive, as well) Were your personal boundaries ever violated in any way? Were you told that other people's needs were more important than yours? Any of these things – and more – might have resulted in you not having had enough experience with healthy and effective limit-setting.

- **Your personal experiences with risk-taking.** What has been the impact of your own experiences with risk-taking, in sport and in other aspects of your life? Have those experiences given you more confidence? Less? When you come face-to-face with a risk in cycling, what's triggered in you? Excitement? Determination? Anxiety?

- **Anxiety.** Ah yes, speak of the devil, our old friend **Anxiety** and its siblings: stress, tension, worry, pressure, and fear. When you confront a limit, does your anxiety stay below threshold? Or, does it inspire avoidance in you? Does any fear of pain, injury, failure, success, or disappointment get in the way of you challenging your limits, or setting them in the first place? If so, are you responding to your anxiety appropriately, or is it holding you hostage?

- **Your inner coach/critic.** How do you talk to yourself about your limits? Are you encouraging? Demeaning? Supportive? Pessimistic?

- **Self-confidence, core beliefs, and self-worth.** How much self-knowledge and inner strength do you bring

to limit-setting and risk-taking? What beliefs about your self affect your reactions to limits?

Knowing what your limits are, knowing which ones are negotiable, setting limits with yourself and others, challenging your limits: these are some of the skills that you may need to work on in order to build mental fitness. But how?

Limits and Three of the Core Skills

Let's look at ways you can strengthen your skill with setting, knowing and challenging limits by seeing how these skills contribute to three of the [five core skills of mentally fit cyclists](#).

1. Goal-setting. In [the article on goal-setting](#), I described management guru [Peter Drucker's](#) concept of SMART goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound. If you don't know your limits, or at least have a well-informed guess, you may not be using your goals to challenge yourself enough. Or, you may set a goal that's far too difficult. And that may be a recipe for overtraining, burnout, or worse. And why set a maniacal goal? What's driving that? Remember Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air," the story of a tragic ascent of Mt. Everest? That's an extreme example. Krakauer [writes of the ascent's last stage](#):

Predetermined turn-around times were egregiously and willfully ignored. The latter may have been influenced to some degree by the rivalry between Fischer and Hall. Fischer had a charismatic personality, and that charisma had been brilliantly marketed. Fischer was trying very hard to eat Hall's lunch, and Hall knew it. In a certain sense, they may have been playing chicken up there, each guide plowing ahead with one eye on the clock, waiting to see who was going to blink first and turn around.

Rather than keeping what might have been their #1 goal in mind ("Do not die"), something – ego, rivalry, "playing chicken," or, to be fair, oxygen deprivation – influenced the climbers to make literally fatal mistakes. I realize fatal mistakes are rare in cycling. But compensating for something inside yourself by pushing too hard: that's common. So remember to:

- Stick with SMART goals and re-evaluate them regularly;
- Reset your goals when necessary (illness, injury, unplanned vacation, learning something new about yourself);
- Use process goals as well as outcome goals; and
- Avoid toughening your goal the second you finish a ride or race ("goal-creep").

Finally, your goal-setting in cycling directly affects cycling's role in your life. Having the right boundaries around the time and energy you put into cycling – and if you have the wrong boundaries, investigating the reasons – is going to help you bring your "best self" to your cycling. Practicing this kind of balance will likely translate into better skill with limits elsewhere, too.

2. Communication There are many ways in which setting and respecting limits comes up in communication. In cycling, you may find yourself communicating with someone – a coach, a race official, a competitor – who presents you with an opportunity to examine, and perhaps assert, your limits. For example, if your coach is condescending, controlling, or shaming when you disagree with him/her, you have a choice: will his/her reaction have leverage with you? (Note: People who grow up without boundaries or with complete barriers to close family often have a deep sensitivity to what they perceive as rejection; that could be what's happening with him/her.) Or are you going to stand up for yourself? Sometimes the most difficult part of asking for respect is dealing with the disappointment when you don't – or won't – get it. If you ever have these kinds of experiences with people in your cycling world, Patricia Evans' classic book, *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, might be helpful to you.

Another way in which limits come up in communication is in helping others. Are you offering to help your training partners or teammates too much, on and off the bike? If you don't limit your helping, you may fall into what

[Dale Larson](#) calls "the helper's pit": overinvolvement with others, and underinvolvement with yourself. And that often leads to fatigue, resentment, and burnout.

[The article on balancing self-interest and cooperation](#) notes that you may also wrestle with limits in deciding whether to cooperate with other cyclists during a race. And, the [article on Communication](#) gives further steps you can take to work with limits.

3. Effective Self-Talk What kind of coach are you for *yourself*? Do you encourage yourself to take prudent risks and push your limits in cycling? Are you harsh with yourself when you don't take risks, or when you do and "fail"? How you talk to yourself about your limits needs to have its own limits on negativity. Peter Drucker – whose daughter, as it happens, is a cyclist – said, "People who don't take risks generally make about two big mistakes a year. People who do take risks generally make about two big mistakes a year." That could be something that the self-coach in you can use.

On the other hand, maybe you tell yourself that you're like Walter (Gib) Gibson, played by John Cusack, in the movie *The Sure Thing*: you're a person "who likes to live on the edge." Risks are your best friends. Or are they? What meaning do you make of limits? Does it serve you to be so "fearless"? If so, great! But if not, perhaps you could benefit from examining exactly what the attraction of limit-busting is for you; it may be wise to ratchet things down a bit at times. To go deeper on that topic, you may want to check out the article on [Handling Pressure](#), where I write about examining your expectations of yourself and the possible role of perfectionism – often fed by anxiety – in your cycling.

Well, that was a quick ride through a very important topic. (Note to my editor: I'm respecting your limit.) Challenging limits is one of the most exciting aspects of cycling, fearing limits is one of the biggest obstacles, and extending limits is one of the most fulfilling experiences. I wish you strength in your work with limits. And...loving it.



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