

Comparing Yourself With Others

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Whether you're racing, thinking about your cycling, or just out for a ride, you're likely comparing yourself with other cyclists at times. Is it increasing your motivation and insight? Or is it creating too much pressure and draining your self-confidence? The mentally fit cyclist knows how to use comparisons wisely and how to stop comparisons when they're destructive.

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 discussing ways you can **know, set, and challenge limits** as a cyclist. This month, I explore the topic of comparing yourself with others, a tricky subject for many athletes and often a big contributor to mental fitness.

So many of us are striving to be better, stronger, and faster (cue the "Six Million Dollar Man" TV show theme) as cyclists. You finish higher or lower than a rival. You were stronger on the climbs today than a teammate. Someone wins, everyone else doesn't. And then there's the old saying, "If there are two cyclists, it's a race." So you're on a training ride, and you say to yourself, "this time, I'll beat my buddy to the city limit sign." Or you're riding a century, and you're trying to drop someone in the last 10 miles. So let's face it: comparison is at the heart of sport and competition.

Or is it?

You're striving to be better, stronger, and faster...than whom? How much of your passion for cycling is fueled by the striving, and how much by your desire for a specific outcome?

As I noted in [the article on sustaining motivation](#), motivation can be *intrinsic* or *extrinsic*. If you're intrinsically motivated, you love what you do because you love the *process*. It comes from within. If you're extrinsically (ie. externally) motivated, you'll be fueled by *outcomes* and *outcome goals*: results, or others' regard for you, or both. You'll tend to compare your performance – if not yourself – with others'. And you'll tend to be affected more by things you can't fully control, such as competitors' performance, mechanicals, and failure. Not good.

Just to be clear, I'm not saying external motivation is always a bad thing. The right amount of "I want to win" or "I want to be as skilled as he is" can be rocket fuel. (It does seem to help Speed Racer, who, as you may know, wants to be like his brother, Racer X.) But research – according to Weinberg and Gould's *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology* – shows that a *mastery orientation*, where your focus is on improving relative to past performances, tends to lead to optimal performance. "I want to climb Mt. Diablo in under an hour this year", "I want to complete my first metric century this summer," "I want to improve my Maximum Steady State power by 15 watts over the next 12 months" – those are coming from within. When you're intrinsically motivated, you're comparing yourself to...yourself.

But you're not out of the woods yet. What if your standards for yourself are too high? In the words of Brandt, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, in the movie *The Big Lebowski*: *This is our concern, dude*. Your constant grasping for a "bar" that's always out of reach may leave your self-confidence in tatters.

And finally, speaking of [self-confidence](#), it can be an illusion if it's fueled by comparisons with others. That hit home for me this week in New York City, where I was visiting for the first time since 9/11. My hotel room overlooked the World Trade Center site, which is just at the beginning of its rebuilding project. Every few minutes I'd hear an air horn sound, and then a minute later I'd see and hear a blast on the floor of the construction site. I was told that after each blast, the rubble is carted away, and the hole is filled in with something strong (cement?), so as to create a sufficiently strong foundation over time – a kind of "shoring up." For us human beings, shoring ourselves up by comparing ourselves favorably to others can create a "house of cards" kind of self-confidence, which can be vulnerable to a strong wind. Lasting self-confidence comes from within.

Comparisons and The 5 Core Skills

Let's look at how using and managing comparisons can be a building block for each of the [five core skills of mentally fit cyclists](#).

1. Goal-setting. If you're unduly influenced by what a competitor is achieving, if you habitually put too much

pressure on yourself (ask yourself why!), or if you don't know yourself well enough to make an effective comparison with your past performance, you'll likely push too hard. Stick to [the core principles of goal-setting](#): setting SMART goals, resetting them when necessary, avoiding goal-creep (that's not a person), and using process goals.

Note that process goals (eg., "If I start to get dropped on a climb, I'm going to focus on maintaining good form") can help you focus more on your own experience and things within your control, rather than getting distracted by unneeded comparisons with others. Pro cyclist [Ben Jacques-Maynes](#) of the Bissell Pro Cycling team, in the article [The Mind of a Mentally Fit Pro](#), spoke eloquently about how doping by competitors – something beyond his control – had broadened his focus from "just win, baby" to factors (eg. his preparation, his effort) that were within his control.

2. Communication As I noted in the [article on Communication](#) and [the article on Self-Interest and Cooperation](#), it may serve you to work with others at times, rather than getting distracted by comparing yourself to them.

Jerry Lynch and Warren Scott, in their book "Running Within," suggest:

"When you trace the derivation of the verb 'to compete,' you discover that it comes from the Latin word competere, which means 'to seek together'....See the advantage of having your opponents around: don't seek to 'kill' them off. By so doing, you may perform at a higher level consistently....Perhaps we need to view...any competitive situation in life as a contest. The Latin word for contest is contestari, meaning 'to call to witness.' Your opponents are witnesses to what you do; in every race you take a pledge to do your best....You are both there to teach each other how to be your best."

3. Concentration On the one hand, *observing* how a mentally fit competitor stays focused can be inspiring and enlightening. But *comparing* yourself with others can be just plain distracting.

In the [Mind of a Mentally Fit Pro](#) article, [Katheryn Curi Mattis](#) of the Webcor Builders team points out that she sometimes gets distracted by others while racing. Whether or not she's managing comparisons in doing so, the ways she regains her focus may work for you:

"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."

Consciousness is not only located in the mind. Especially when your mind starts to dominate your experience, locating more of your consciousness in your body can get things under control – in this case, it can help you regain your focus. And for thousands of years, the breath has been seen by many traditions as the primary link between mind and body. Check out the article on [Breathing Techniques](#) for some ideas on using the breath to recover from distractions.

4. Effective Self-Talk If you've read [the article on self-talk](#), you know what's coming here. "I'll never be as strong as him," "She's going to beat me again, I know it," "He dropped me; I suck." Comparisons, if you make them from a weak place in yourself – a place of shakiness, or fear, or not feeling good about yourself – can generate destructive self-talk. It can scare away the inner coach and unleash the inner critic.

On the other hand, if you make a comparison from a strong place – a place of self-confidence and self-acceptance – then you may be in a position to get inspiration, insight, or motivation from the comparison. You may say something to yourself like, "He's so strong. I'm going to ask him about his training program afterwards and see if I can learn something that will help me," or "She's the best climber in the field, and I'm only 50 meters behind her on this long climb. I'm climbing well today."

Continue to ask yourself the question: what kind of coach are you going to be for yourself?

5. Managing Emotions If you've read the articles on self-talk or [managing emotions](#), you know that anxiety – and its siblings fear, stress, tension, worry, and pressure – creates cognitive distortions. In other words, anxiety causes your mind to view reality inaccurately (in any of 9 basic ways, as researcher [Aaron Beck](#) and his team showed in the 1960's). You're probably familiar with the distortion called *maximizing*, also known as *catastrophizing*. That's when you have a headache, you feel a burst of anxiety, and your mind says, "I have a brain tumor." And that creates more anxiety. (See any movie with Woody Allen in it for details.)

Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning, in their classic book, “Self-Esteem,” say that cognitive distortions are “the weapons the [inner] critic brings to bear against your self-esteem.” Comparing yourself destructively with others is often a sign of the distortion called *personalizing*, where everything seems related to you in some way, and you have frequent certainty that you’re being evaluated. If your world revolves too much around yourself, you’re very likely to compare yourself with others just about every chance you get. People who go on and on about how great they (think they) are often get pegged as “all about you” types. Notice that “He’s so much stronger than me. I suck!” can be just as self-involved. Reducing your negative self-talk through thought-stopping (“Stop comparing!”), questioning (“What’s the proof?”), thought-replacement (“I can just be me, without comparing.”), along with other anxiety-reducing tactics such as breathwork and visualization can help here.

So comparing yourself with others can be helpful at times, but the wrong comparisons can move you away from being yourself, feeling solid, and discovering your true potential. Depending on your personality, upbringing, life experiences, and which side of the bed you woke up on, it can be very difficult to choose when, how, and with whom to compare yourself. For a final bit of guidance, I give you the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in his “Letters to a Young Poet”:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. . . . And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”



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