

Self-Awareness

By Marvin Zauderer

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Improving any aspect of your mental fitness starts with self-awareness. Thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, sense memories, behaviors – all are raw material for the growth of the mental side of your game. The mentally fit cyclist makes ongoing self-awareness a priority, and uses it to strengthen core mental skills.

In last month's Sport Psychology column, I began our series on **Integral Elements**, the building blocks of the mentally fit cyclist's five core skills, by describing how [Breathing Techniques](#) can help you improve your mental fitness. This month, I reflect (!) on Self-Awareness, explore how it contributes to mental fitness on the bike, and suggest ways you can strengthen your self-awareness for better cycling performance.

In contrast to other animals – although I suspect our cat, Whizzy, would disagree – we human beings have the unique ability to be self-aware: to reflect on our moment-to-moment experience. When you invoke your self-awareness, what do you find? Joy. Fears. Guilt. Passion. Beliefs. Judgments. Values. Self-talk. Physical sensations. Sense memories of experiences. Habitual reactions. Mindful responses. And much, much more.

On the one hand, self-awareness can be overwhelming at times. Particularly after reading the front page of the newspaper, my wife is fond of gazing wistfully at our wonderful dog, [Finn](#), and dreaming of what it would be like to have his unfettered consciousness.

In addition, the quest for increased self-awareness may, at some point, have diminishing returns for some of us. As the great singer-songwriter [Caren Armstrong](#) says in her song HeartStrings, "Well we may never know why we're alive/But Buddha said that understanding is the booby-prize."

And on top of that, increasing your self-awareness can be very difficult. In the words of philosopher [Alan Watts](#): "Trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth."

But knowing yourself better – by definition, a lifelong process – can pay big dividends in your cycling.

In psychiatrist [Arthur Deikman's](#) view, what we call the *self* derives from four ways in which we experience ourselves:

- **The Thinking Self.** This self "seems to be in charge": planning, solving problems, controlling our immediate activities. It gives us our *idea* of who and what we are – according to others, and in our own, private view.
- **The Emotional Self.** This self comprises all of our feelings, and "at times ...seems closest to the core of our being, for nothing seems to be more completely our self than our emotions."
- **The Functional Self.** This, according to Deikman, is our awareness of our ability to affect the world concretely: we "*do* things." (Hmmm. I wonder if he rides.)
- **The Observing Self.** This is "the transparent center, that which is aware." For Deikman, "no matter what we experience, nothing is as central as the self which observes." Deikman contrasts Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," with an updated starting point for selfhood: "I am aware, therefore I am." By extracting the observing self from that which is observed, the "observed world of emotions, thoughts, and sensations becomes correspondingly less compelling, less dictatorial, and unquestioned." In other words, our mind – when necessary – can get the heck out of our

way.

Let's look at some examples of how self-awareness contributes to the five core skills of mentally fit cyclists.

1. Goal-Setting. In [the article on goal-setting](#), I discussed Peter Drucker's SMART objectives: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound. In the articles on [sustaining motivation](#) and [recovering from injury](#), I discussed the idea of using SMART goals to give cycling the right role in your life. Your self-awareness is key to knowing what the right goals are for you.

2. Concentration. As I noted in [the article on this skill](#), knowing when you're focused – What does it feel like? Sound like? Look like? – along with knowing your dominant *focus style*, are critical to improving your concentration.

3. Communication. Relationships affect performance in sports, and communication is central to relationships. If you have more self-awareness, you'll tend to [communicate more effectively](#), whether it's with your teammates, coach, competitors, family, or friends.

4. Positive Self-Talk. What kind of coach are you for yourself? How aware are you of [how you talk to yourself](#) before, during, and after rides/races? Strong voices – parents, coaches, teachers, bosses, mentors, siblings – tend to stay with us. Like the proverbial fish which has lived only in water, and thus doesn't "know" that it's in it, some of you may have had the same negative voice in your head for a very long time, and may not always notice that it's there.

5. Managing Emotions. How and when does stress, fear, or anger affect your performance on the bike? What do you do when these emotions come up? Do you always know when they do come up? Increasing your [skill in managing your emotions](#) starts with being aware of your feelings, being aware of how they can "trigger" automatic reactions in you, and being aware of the tools you've already collected to manage them.

For the article [The Mind of a Mentally Fit Pro](#), published during the recent Tour of California, I interviewed three pro cyclists who have made mental fitness a priority. Notice the self-awareness in these excerpts:

• **Katheryn Curi Mattis (Webcor Builders):** "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."

• **Steven Cozza (Slipstream/Chipotle):** "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."

• **Ben Jacques-Maynes (Bissell):** "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."

These cyclists have worked to strengthen what Dr. Deikman calls *observer consciousness*. How can you strengthen yours? Here are some ideas:

1. Courageous Self-Reflection. Things within us that are hidden from our awareness are often hidden because they make us feel anxious, sad, or angry. It's part of the human condition, at least at times, to defend ourselves against discomfort. So on and off the bike it can take courage to reveal and confront what we're truly thinking and feeling. [James Hollis](#) has written wonderfully and concisely on this topic, as have many other authors.

2. Breathing. As I discussed in [last month's article](#), our breath has been seen by many over the years as the royal road to what's essential within us.

3. Meditation/Mindfulness Practices. Any of these traditions can increase your awareness of what you're experiencing in a given moment. Many of them, not coincidentally, focus on the breath. The work of [Pema Chodron](#), [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) and [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#) are examples of places to start if you're interested in exploring this area further.

4. Solo Travel. We humans have a long history of "getting out of our element" as a way to know ourselves better: The Native Americans' "vision quest," Jack Kerouac's "On the Road," backpacking from hostel to hostel in Europe....Have you been telling yourself that you'll get around to this? Just do it.

5. Creative Expression. Whether it's art, music, dance, writing, or just expressing your creative spirit more fully in your job, creativity can reveal things about yourself that you didn't know were there. Sometimes it takes getting it outside of you to know that it's in you.

6. Spiritual/Religious Life. Organized religions and an immense variety of other spiritual practices have been connecting us better with ourselves for thousands of years. Parenting, for example!

7. Personality Typing. At the risk of "pigeonholing" you, self-tests such as [Meyers-Briggs](#) and the [Enneagram](#) can provide catalysts and raw material for your own honest self-evaluation – the only opinion that truly matters.

8. Being of service. Helping others – in your job, as a volunteer, with your friends and family – is a wonderful way not only to make a difference, but to discover in yourself what you experience in others.

9. Therapy/Counseling. If you've never done this before, and you'd like to get a sense for what it can be like, [Irvin Yalom's books](#) are good places to start.

10. Ask someone you trust. Most of us, if not all of us, have our blind spots. If you're wondering about yourself in some way, ask someone who knows you well and will be honest yet compassionate with you. And remember: they might not be right.

11. Ride lots! Eddy Merckx's advice is deeper than it first appears. Cycling offers us not only opportunities for fun and good health, but also provides challenges that are a crucible for our growth as human beings.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius prepares his son, Laertes, for a journey by directing him to commit "a few precepts to memory," including: "This above all/to thine own self be true...." Wise direction for a lifelong journey.



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