

# Sport Psychology: Train Your Mind – Part 1

By Marvin Zauderer

[\[PezCyclingNews.com/January 2007\]](http://PezCyclingNews.com/January 2007)

How's your self-confidence on the bike? Your concentration? Do you ever have stress from being too hard on yourself, from goals that aren't quite right, from dealing with crashes and injuries, or from relationships with other riders?

In a complete training program, the mind is as important as the body. Many top amateur and professional athletes know that mental fitness, as much or more than physical fitness, gives them an edge over their competitors. But what's *mental* training? Mentally fit athletes focus on these five core skills:

- 1. Goal-setting.** Before I realized the importance of cycling to my well-being and to ultimate peace on earth, I worked in Corporate America. There I learned that objectives should be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound. Lo and behold, it applies to your cycling, too. If you don't ensure that your goals are set correctly, you may be setting yourself up for needless disappointment, frustration, and self-blame, not to mention under- or overtraining and burnout. But, if you use your brainpower to set well-tuned goals, you'll set yourself up to maximize your motivation and to build on successes.
- 2. Self-talk.** Try this: the next time you're on the bike, pay close attention to any chatter in your head. If the din isn't too loud, parse out the things you're saying to yourself. Things like, "I'm really feeling strong today," "I'm definitely going to get dropped," "I need to be in the front third of the field," or "She's much stronger than me today." Are these thoughts helping you? Distracting you? Making you feel worse? Better? Thoughts affect feelings, and feelings affect thoughts. Becoming more aware of how you talk to yourself is the first step toward improving that conversation. Although you may hire a coach, you still need to be a good coach for yourself.
- 3. Arousal management.** No, ladies and gentlemen, we're not talking about the Daily Distractions or that "Cycling Men of Italy" calendar you saw at Borders. We're talking about emotions: anger, disappointment, elation, frustration, fear. Take fear, for example. Fear, anxiety, stress, tension, worry, pressure: they're all in the same family, and it's a family that can be worse than the Simpsons. If your stress level is above threshold, so to speak, or if you're having bursts of unproductive anxiety during a ride or race, you may be paying a price. Anxiety can drive lapses in concentration, needless energy-wasting, increased heart rate, poor decision-making, panicky braking or swerving, and all sorts of other Bad Things. On the other hand, a bit of anxiety – as any experienced public speaker will tell you – can push you to be razor-sharp in your

performance. Achieving that “edge” means not just managing but also *using* your stress. It can be a Good Thing. Your tools? Self-talk, mental imagery, and breathing techniques all come in handy when you’re working on managing arousal during a ride or race. And having an effective pre-ride or pre-race mental preparation routine can give you a great start.

- 4. Concentration.** Managing your attention is critically important to your chances of attaining optimal performance. If you lose focus, you may miss your best chance to attack, respond too late when you’re being attacked, invite the risk of a crash, or just plain waste time in your workout. To improve concentration, it’s important to recognize recurring distractions, to know at all times where your focus should be, to manage your anxiety and reactions to stressors, and to have a refocusing plan (often involving self-talk) for each of your major distractions. And lapses in concentration don’t have to become catastrophes if you refocus well. It’s a bit like watching a singer: she may forget the words, but it’s how skillfully she recovers that determines whether the show grinds to a halt or gets smoothly back on track.
- 5. People skills.** If you’re training with other riders, if you’re a member of a cycling club or racing team, or if you have a coach, your people skills are likely to have a direct effect on your enjoyment, stress, and performance. For example, you may feel the need to train alone in order to do your workouts effectively, but you may have team members who resent that. Or you may have difficulty telling your coach that his approach isn’t working for you. Or you may need to step forward and be the leader of your team. Assertiveness, communication, and empathy are only some of the people skills that you may need to improve if you’re going to reach your cycling goals.

In addition to knowing what sport psychology is, it’s also important to know what it is not. If you’re struggling with psychological issues that seem to go beyond what’s described above, don’t hesitate: get an assessment by a licensed mental health professional. Depression, anxiety that significantly impairs your work, relationships, or other aspects of your life, and eating disorders are three examples of clinical issues that should not be addressed by a sport psychology consultant. And any sport psychology professional worth their salt would know to refer you to a licensed psychotherapist, licensed counselor, psychiatrist, or other qualified mental health professional at the first sign of any clinical issues. If you want to pursue an assessment on your own, good sources for referrals might include friends, your doctor, or the Psychology Today [“Find a Therapist”](#) countrywide service.

Speaking of resources, what should you do if you want to work on the core Mental Training skills? If you want to study on your own, here are a couple of books that I've used:

[U.S. Olympic Committee Mental Training Manual](#)

[Sport Psychology for Cyclists](#), by Dr. Saul Miller and Peggy Maass Hill

If you have a coach, s/he may be qualified to work with you on these skills. At a recent USA Cycling seminar that I attended, I heard a prominent elite-level cycling coach say that 90% of his work with his athletes was on mental training. If you're looking for a cycling coach, the USA Cycling website has a directory [here](#).

You can also work on these skills with a Sport Psychologist or Sport Psychology Consultant. The American Psychological Association has published [this guide](#) to selecting a sport psychology professional. Many professionals in the field work by phone and/or email as well as in person.

In upcoming articles, I'll go into detail on the core skills, giving you practical tips that you can use on and off the bike. Do you have a specific topic that you'd like me to address? I'd like to hear from you. I want to know what -- and how -- you're thinking!



**Marvin Zauderer** leads the Mental Training program at [Whole Athlete](#), a performance center in Marin County, California that provides a comprehensive set of coaching, testing, fitting, and consulting services to amateur and professional athletes. He is a [licensed psychotherapist](#), [USA Cycling Level 2 Coach](#), and Masters road racer for [Synergy Racing](#). You can email comments and questions to him at [marvinz@pobox.com](mailto:marvinz@pobox.com).