



Psychology

Preparing for a Challenge

Words by: Ruth Anderson, Sport Psychologist, MIND HQ

Thriving Under Pressure

The ability to perform under pressure is a skill required for every competitive athlete. Pressure can either help or hinder your performance, depending on how you perceive the pressure, and what you do to respond.

With the upcoming Challenge GC half many athletes will be testing their skills over a longer distance than previously raced, and will confront new experiences when competing. Athletes can learn to thrive under pressure when they grab the opportunity to challenge their abilities and understand what they need to do to gain the optimal psychological state to compete.

There are simple strategies you can implement to maximise both your preparation and performance for competition, and enable you to use the pressure of competition to assist you to perform at your best.

PREPARING TO COMPETE

To maximise your preparation to perform on race day consider the following:

Manage your expectations

Maintain a positive and constructive perspective on the competition to effectively deal with pressure. Focus on using the opportunity to transfer your skills from the training environment, and set your own expectations about what you need to do to compete at your best.

Define your expectations by actions and processes that are within your control, rather than focusing on times or places. Remember, you won't know what your best is until you achieve it.

Take control of your thinking

In the days leading into the race you may notice you start to worry, doubt your ability or keep thinking about the race. Be assertive in taking control of your thinking.

Challenge the thinking that is causing the stress or worry, take control, and adopt a more constructive way of thinking. You have a choice about the way you think. Changing your perspective on the situation will directly influence the way you feel and respond under pressure.

Stay relaxed

Ensure you maintain the intensity in your training in the lead up to competition, but 'switch your mind off' outside of the training environment. Find ways to relax and limit the time you think about the competition. If you are relaxed in the lead up to competition, it will assist in managing your anxiety on race day.

Build confidence in your ability

Focus on consolidating your skills and maximising your training in the lead up to race day. Comparing yourself to others, or being preoccupied with potential times and outcomes, will only place limits on your

performance. Focus on your strengths, and what you need to do to execute your skills on race day to remain confident in your ability to compete.

COMPETITION STRATEGIES

To get the best from yourself in competition you can implement strategies on race day to assist in achieving the optimal psychological state to perform.

Compete with a plan

Develop a plan detailing what you will need to do to execute your race. Keep it simple, and focus on the key skills that will assist you to achieve your best performance. If you get distracted during the race, or start thinking too far ahead while competing, you can immediately direct your thoughts back to your plan.

Deal with your anxiety

Nerves are a reality of every competition environment. View your nerves as a sign that you are activated and ready to compete. Accept your emotions as a normal aspect of competition, and commit to action, rather than fighting against the symptoms of anxiety.

Use breathing to relax your body and clear your mind. Focus your thoughts on the current moment and the process of what you need to do to execute your race plan.

The earlier you recognise you are feeling anxious or worried the easier it will be to control.

Manage transitions effectively

Transitions can be used to reset your thinking. If you are aware of any negative thoughts or worries or you are distracted by a previous error, use the transition as an opportunity to gain a clear mind for the next segment of the race.

Be assertive when dealing with any concerns about the previous segment of the race, take a few breaths to clear your mind, and focus on the next part of your race plan using short cues or instructions.

Trust in your ability

Research has shown that athletes perform more effectively and automatically, when they are able to let go of the fear of making a mistake, and are able to trust in their ability to execute the skill.

You will perform successfully if you are confident in your skills, your thinking is focused on execution of your skills, and you can maintain composure both prior too and during the race.

Pressure can lead to you gaining a higher performance outcome than you may have thought possible. Embrace it, and see what you can achieve on race day.