

## Chapter 7

# Mental Preparation

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In addition to the literature that exists on the physiological side of training, there is also a literature on the mental side. In this section, we compare it to the mental practices that Greg Barton employs.

In a very general sense, the literature on mental training is of two types. First, there are techniques for helping the athlete concentrate. These usually focus on improving the athlete's training during the year leading up to the big race, but they come into play during the race as well. Secondly, there are techniques for relaxing the athlete so he is able to perform up to his level of ability. If he is able to relax in the tense situation, the argument goes, nervousness or even panic cannot break his concentration and deflect him from his pre-planned race strategy. The relaxation techniques are most useful on race day itself, but they also have application during the training year.

Breaking the two categories down further, we have the following four areas:

- **Improving self-image.** The premise here is that if you want to change human behavior, the first thing you have to do is change the person's self-image. In this case, the athlete is convinced he is capable of an outstanding athletic performance. Self-image is usually controlled by the self-conscious, so a lot of self-image training is aimed at ensuring that subconscious motives are helping, rather than hindering, the athlete.
- **Setting goals.** The literature on this usually focuses on helping people set ambitious long-term goals and then set realistic short-term ones for reaching them, as well as generating the emotional commitment necessary for following through with the plan.
- **Improving concentration.** Mental rehearsal is one of the mentioned techniques in this category. In essence, it is the technique of thinking through in elaborate detail what you are about to do—a big

race, or even a training session — so that you are fully prepared to do your best in it. The idea is that the subconscious mind cannot tell the difference between an actual experience and one that is vividly imagined; that is, if you are able to think in great detail about what the race will be like — how hard it will be at the end, what the water temperature is like, what the smells are, what the crowd is doing, how well you are pacing yourself — it will be exactly the same as actually doing it, and you will therefore be able to familiarize yourself with it even without doing it.

• **Controlling anxiety.** Hypnosis, autogenic training, transcendental meditation, the idea of competing against yourself and not others, and listening to relaxation tapes are all examples of ways to control anxiety.

We will see how Barton has come to use some of these principles through years of experience.

### **Barton's Mental Approach**

While he does not have an elaborate system of mental training, Barton does advocate the following:

- 1. Have a precise reason for whatever it is you are doing.**

*I think it helps if you know why you're doing something, rather than just having a coach give you a program and you follow it blindly. I think it helps if you can actually visualize yourself gaining benefit from a workout that you are doing. For example, if you are doing a weight workout, you can say, "O.K., this is making me stronger so I can pull harder on the paddle so I can go faster." I think a lot of it is subconscious; if you really believe in what you are doing, it's a lot more effective than just doing it because someone's telling you to do it. There's more of a purpose. It's sort of a philosophical thing: Why am I doing this? If you can answer that, it's easier to motivate yourself to go out there and do the workout than if you are doing it just because someone tells you to. At times, even if your assumption is wrong, it's better than having no assumption at all. If somebody honestly believes that doing a lot of 250 meter sprints will improve his aerobic base, it probably will, although he might do even better doing some longer pieces. At least he has a purpose for doing it.*

But Barton also means having a good reason for doing competitive kayaking at all:

*For me, it is a personal challenge just to see whether I can really go fast enough to win the World Championships, or to break a certain time. To me, that's a thrill in itself — just seeing how fast I can go, whether I can do it or not. But there are other aspects as well. I do enjoy paddling, but not every day. Sometimes the drudgery of the workouts gets pretty boring. But I like being healthy and being in good shape and I enjoy a lot of the people I meet at the competitions. But I'd say those are the side benefits. The main reason I do the sport is just the thrill of seeing how well I can perform.*

### 2. Use mental rehearsal before training sessions.

*If you think about what you are going to do in a workout before you get out there, it's much easier to concentrate when you get there because you've already thought it through. For example, if I've been having problems with getting my blade buried at the start of the stroke, I just think about how it's going to feel, even when I'm not on the water, like when I'm waiting for the bus or something. Or, if you think about a workout you are going to do and how you should pace the pieces, how it's going to feel at the 250 meter mark, then when you get out there it's easier to concentrate because you have a game plan.*

### 3. Train with other people selectively.

*There are certain times when I prefer to train alone and others when I prefer to train with groups of people. They both have benefits. Training with others makes it easy to motivate yourself. When you know someone else is going to be at the workout at 5:30 a.m., you're motivated to get down there and practice. And once you get on the water, if you've got three other boats that are your speed, then you see the results of your efforts a lot more clearly. If you're out there hanging even with somebody and then you start pulling harder on each stroke, you can see that you're moving ahead of him. It's a lot more motivating to see that when you work hard, you're ahead of those guys and when you slack off, they're ahead of you. Also, maybe you can learn something by watching the others. Perhaps somebody has a certain way of starting and always has good starts in a race. You can pick up something there.*

*But there are disadvantages of training with others. The main one is getting caught up in simply trying to beat the others rather than actually concentrating on the specific purpose of the workout. For example, if you're working on technique, a lot of times you want to hold back a little instead of going berserk out there. You want to think "O.K., I want to reach way out and have a straight arm at the catch." But as soon as somebody creeps up beside you, you throw all that out the window and do whatever you have to do to win. Another thing I've seen is that people start playing little mind games in the workouts. Some people know that once they get ahead of this other person, they can break that person's will and the other person will back off. The goal of the workout becomes to get ahead in the first 15 strokes of each piece, and whoever is behind gives up and allows the person who is ahead to just cruise for the rest of the piece. But if you're on your own, you can concentrate more on pacing out the workout the way it should be done, using a good, hard effort for the entire piece and not just getting ahead and sitting on it.*

The following three are his mental approaches to big races:

#### 1. Use familiar routines at race sites.

*If you can use the same patterns on race day that you have developed in training, I think this helps to calm nerves a lot. Even though you are in a*

*strange location and there are a lot of strange people and the competition is coming up, if you have a familiar warm-up routine, something you've done over and over again in the past, I think it helps you to just think about the task at hand: you're going out there and you're going to race hard, and you're going to pace it out the way you thought about in training rather than worrying about all those other distractions.*

**2. Be by yourself just before the race.**

*It works best for me to go off somewhere and do some stretching and lay down. I've never practiced anything like transcendental meditation or yoga, but I think what I do is similar to what people do when they meditate, like getting relaxed and doing some deep breathing, sort of concentrating on your breathing, in and out, so that you're tuning into your body, rather than worrying about all these outside distractions you have. And then I think about what I'm going to do in the race, how the start's going to be, what I'm going to do on the first few strokes, and what I intend to do in the middle of the race, how it's going to feel and what position I'll be in. And then what the finish will be like. Will I kick at the finish or am I going to try to go out hard in the early middle and just hang on at the end?*

**3. Stick to the race plan.**

*When I'm at the start, I try to think about doing my own best time, rather than worrying about some other person two lanes over who has a fast start, or a fast finish. You do have to be aware of what they can do and have a race plan which takes that into consideration, but I think you need to stick to your race plan and not change it because somebody jumped out a boat length at the start and then you give up, or decide you have to make it up right away rather than realizing you have another 800 meters to do it. If you have a race plan of where you're planning to gain and where you're really going to pour it on, you're better off sticking to that rather than letting somebody else dictate your race. Dictate your own race.*