

MOTIVATE ME

As the triathlon season rapidly approaches, we now turn our attention to getting the ‘hard yards’ done. We often ask ourselves, ‘why do we do this?’ Most athletes will ask themselves this question a number of times during their racing career. Self-doubt and the endless sacrifices we make for sport often get on top of us and test our resolve. What makes elite athletes participate with such ease? Why do some athletes struggle day in, day out?

If we look at the profile of successful athletes, regardless of the sport, they all share similar characteristics. All are precise and diligent in their training regime. They are generally optimistic people who share a long-term vision and have completed an ‘apprenticeship’ in their chosen sport over a number of years.

The weight of importance each characteristic plays in the development of an athlete’s success is largely individual as each athlete has his or her own idiosyncrasies and relationships to the various characteristics. For example, I was watching an interview with Greg Norman a number of years ago after he lost the US Open Golf Tournament on the last hole from his own error. Greg was highly optimistic in his response, he did not take on board the liability of the mistake and the subsequent loss. He simply acknowledged his fault and then offered a detailed analysis of how he could have done it better and what would have happened if the ball had’ve gone in the hole. In this way, he uses the power of optimism and a long-term vision to assist in maintaining his motivation.

Jana Pittman is another example to consider. Generally, when talking of performance, Jana mentions how hard or well she has been training. This indicates that one of Jana’s strongest tools for ‘motivation’ and ‘measure of success’ is her ability to get hard training sessions done. This would certainly not be her only source of motivation. However, we would find that she is an ‘internally’ motivated person whose criteria for being successful would be ‘the more pain I can feel in training, the harder each session is. The more sessions I get through, the better an athlete I am’.

What is the key to motivation?

Firstly, at a ‘macro’ level, we must understand that we have broad characteristics that are the same for every athlete. Secondly, understand that everyone is an individual and has different ‘micro’ requirements that should be understood.

Macro level – big picture thinking

It is an accepted view that we become motivated for two reasons:

- To achieve a goal
- To move away from something negative (fear of failure).

Do you race triathlon because you want to be the best you can be (achievement) or, because you don't want to be fat and overweight (trying to move away from something)?

Surprisingly, many people use fear of failure as their strongest motivating factor. There is nothing wrong with this but it may cause negative emotional states. It is far more powerful to motivate yourself by your desire to achieve.

Now that you are aware of the difference, you can change the way you think about why you compete in triathlon. If you are one of the people who use fear of failure to motivate yourself, perhaps pick a long and short-term goal, and try to focus on moving towards them.

Goal setting

Use long and short-term goals to become more accountable and to create a pathway for your performance. Differentiate between 'outcome' goals and 'process' goals.

- Outcome goals are what you are trying to achieve.
- Process goals are what you need to do to in order to achieve your outcome.

An outcome goal may be to finish next years Ironman Australia. A process goal to achieve this outcome would be to train approximately 15 hours per week.

Make your goals logical and specific. Be realistic in the goals you set and make them time-bound. Following is an example of goal setting:

Outcome goals (what I want to achieve)

Long term (6-12months)

1. Finish Ironman Australia next year in under 9 hours and 15 minutes
2. Run sub 3:20 for the marathon off the bike
3. Qualify as a pro for the 2006 Ironman Australia

Short term (1-6 months)

1. Complete one half Ironman as a pro - finish in top 15
2. Finish next 6 weeks training without missing a session
3. Race one half marathon before start of triathlon season

Process goals (what I need to do)

1. Sleep and recover well
2. At each training session make sure I hit the correct target heart rate zones
3. Focus on technique every time I run
4. Manage my weight at the necessary level
5. Stay committed to each training session

Micro level – relationship to sport and life

At micro level we must consider the individuals relationship to sport and perhaps life in general:

- Are you internally or externally motivated?
- Where do you order sport in your life? Is it behind family and career? Is it the absolute priority?
- What does success feel like for you?
- Do you understand the emotions and feelings associated with success and failure?

Lets look at these points individually and try to understand the important role they play in motivating us. If you are an internally motivated person, you will have a select criteria for success that is internal to you. Your evaluation methods for success will generally sound a little like this:

- I feel good
- Yeah, I was feeling good that day
- I felt strong on the bike today - powerful
- I was looking good in the water - each stroke felt awesome.

If you are an externally motivated person, your criteria will be very different. It will often involve other people and sound a little like this:

- John said I was flying last week in training
- When I was riding this morning, I gave those other cyclists a thrashing. They had no chance!
- In the last swim set, I took 10 metres off Barry, that good 400m swimmer. I must be in good shape.

We exhibit a mixture of both characteristics but one is more dominant than the other. When reading the above points if you relate to one more than the other this indicates your dominant orientation and identifies whether you are an internally or externally motivated person.

Now that you know what your orientation is, what can you do with the information? You should try to create an environment that allows you to express yourself and reinforce your criteria at every chance. For example, an externally motivated person should try to train in larger groups and race as often as possible because his or her motivation comes from the feedback of others. An internally motivated person should spend some time alone in training or with a close group of friends as he or she needs to look internally for feedback and does not require the constant feedback of other people as this may be annoying at times.

You may often wonder why you are unable to commit to getting up at 5am each morning before work and why every session seems so difficult. Yet, Joe Bloggs has never missed an early morning session and everything he does just seems effortless. Perhaps one reason is how you prioritise sport in your life. Lets look at five characteristics that most people share in common:

1. Spiritual
2. Relationships - personal (family)
3. Relationships - general
4. Career
5. Health (sport)

Write down in order from most important to least important your priorities in life. If you find that sport is at the lower level of your list you may now understand one of the reasons why commitment to training is difficult. If you are not happy with the priority that you give to sport, lets change it. We can change our relationship to sport at a subconscious level.

We are going to manipulate our subconscious through a very easy process that has been developed by a modality called Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP). If you are happy with the order, perhaps try the following drill anyway, as you may develop some life skills that you can use in many other ways.

Step one

Close your eyes and visualise the current order of your characteristics, seeing them as if they were CDs placed in a CD rack. If you are unable to hold a visual picture you may need to practise this several times over a period of a few days until you are able to see the CDs clearly.

Step two

Look for detail in the visual picture. That is, what colour are the labels of the CDs? Is the writing bigger or bolder on any one CD?

Step three

When you can visualise the details, remember the picture so that you can recall it at any time.

Step four

On paper, write the characteristics in the order you wish them to be. Write the new list a number of times and place it in locations that you visit regularly eg fridge, toilet, car etc.

Step five

Close you eyes again and go back to the original picture. When you are able to hold the picture in your mind, shuffle the characteristics (CDs) into the new order. Again, with any movement of this type, you will need to search for detail in your visualisation. Move the CDs slowly. Try to see the name on the cover and look for the colour of the CD. When you have moved them into the order that you perceive is ideal, hold that picture for a minute or so.

Step six

Pick an event that happens regularly each day. Perhaps answering the telephone or eating a piece of fruit. Every time you do this thing, spend 5-10 seconds visualising the new order of your characteristics as in step five. Do this for about a week.

We have now built sport into your subconscious and ordered it at the appropriate level. Next, lets consider understanding the sensory experience associated with feeling good and feeling bad. If we are able to understand the feelings these emotions generate we can control them and use them to assist in motivation.

Understanding the sensory experience of emotions

Feeling good, feeling strong, feeling powerful, are some of the terms used to describe a positive emotion. If you could feel this way before and during each training session, what would that mean for the quality of the session or race?

Let us understand the emotion. Close your eyes and take your mind to a memory you have of feeling strong, powerful, happy or successful. When you have that place in your mind, start to understand the sensory experience. Look for the following sensations. Make a note of them in your mind so that you can bring them back if required.

How does the emotion 'feel' in your body?

- Are you warm anywhere?
- Does any part of your body tingle?
- Do you have shivers up and down your spine?
- Is your breathing heavy or shallow, fast or slow?

How does the emotion 'sound' in your body?

- Is there a sound attached to the emotion?
- Does it sound loud or soft?
- Does it have its own beat or tempo?

How does the emotion 'look' in your body?

- Do you see yourself in the picture or do you see the picture through your own eyes?
- Is it black and white or colour?
- Is it a moving picture or still?
- Do you have a colour for the emotion - red, yellow, orange?

How does the emotion 'smell' or 'taste' in your body?

- Do you have a smell associated with the emotion?
- Is there a taste in your mouth?

When you have gone through all of the checks you should start to understand the sensory experience your body has when you feel good. We call this your 'code'. For example, a code for feeling good may be:

- A strong warm feeling in my chest with a slightly elevated breathing rate.
- Hands are a little tingly
- The colour of my body is red. The picture I see in my head is large and moving
- I hear people in the background clapping.

Each time you need to feel strong or happy, go back to your code. As with the drill of prioritising sport in your life, you need to practise this at regular intervals until you only need to think of the emotion and all of the positive feelings will come back immediately.

Obviously, understanding a negative emotional state is not as important but it does allow you to be pre-emptive and stop the emotions as they happen because you will know what to look for. Perhaps try the above exercise for a negative emotion just so you are aware of the state.

When all of these techniques are used in conjunction, they become a powerful tool for success that can be manipulated to suit any facet of your life. If sport is not your absolute goal, apply the technique to career, if not career, try relationships. Whatever you focus on, you will enjoy a far higher degree of satisfaction and learning.

A few tricks that also work well

- Make everything you do a 'necessity', not optional. That is, 'I must do this session today', not 'I should do this session today'
- Bring the date of a long-term goal forward to the next week or day perhaps
- Focus on each day as an individual. Today's training is the most important of the year.

Good luck

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