

THE START LINE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE TRIATHLON

I think you can talk yourself into, or out of, almost anything. Triathletes are especially good at both, and they can swing from one extreme to another several times during a race. There are physical fears to conquer, like heavy surf and cold ocean water or a fast downhill turn on the bike (or dusty roads), and mental mountains of endurance to climb as well. The winners, sometimes just the finishers, are those who are able to maintain the necessary level of confidence, composure, and concentration from start to finish. There is no place for self-doubt in a triathlon, yet self-doubt runs rampant through the ranks of even the best. It's a problem that strong arms and legs are only partially capable of solving.

Scott Tinley

Consider whether any of the following circumstances apply to you:

- You trained all year for a particular race only to feel dissatisfied with your result because you know you could have done better.
- You never seem to perform as well in competition as you do in training.
- You find it difficult to maintain focus at key points during the race.
- You lack motivation to train without your training partner(s).
- You have several nagging injuries that interfere with training and competition.

If you have experienced any of the scenarios listed above, then this book can provide the elusive answers to your questions. In all sports there's a delicate balance between training that is optimal for the physical and psychological modifications necessary for performance improvements and training too much. If an optimal balance is not maintained, due to either physical or cognitive reasons, performance suffers. This is especially true in sports like the triathlon, where performance improvement is achieved by subjecting the body and mind to extreme amounts of stress.

It's human nature to challenge the limits of our physical and mental abilities. It is this drive that led to the creation of the triathlon in the early 1970s. Since its inception, the sport of triathlon has gained tremendous momentum, evolving from a sport largely performed by a small number of "super-humans" to its current status as a mainstream, mass-participation sport. Perhaps the crowning achievement of triathlons' evolution has been its inclusion in the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia.

Although the sport of triathlon is still in its infancy, it has a rich history of heroes. People like Dave Scott, Mark Allen, Scott Tinley, Scott Molina, Mike Pigg, Paula Newby-Fraser, and Erin Baker conjure up memories of triathlon's golden days of the 1980s and early '90s, while names like Peter Reid, Tim DeBoom, Simon Whitfield, Natasha Badmann, Michellie Jones, and Lori Bowden remind us that the legacy of triathlon is only just beginning. Clearly, it is an exciting time to be a triathlete, whether you are an international competitor, a first-time sprint triathlete, or at any level in between.

Training for triathlons leads to somewhat of a paradox: triathletes usually enjoy the challenge of strenuous competition but want to make the event as effortless as possible through appropriate training beforehand. The elements that go into achieving triathlon success are as varied as the participants themselves. However, some common characteristics exist. Superior physical fitness is an obvious necessity, but high levels of muscular and cardiovascular strength and endurance do not fully account for successful performance in the triathlon. Few would argue that successful triathlon performance is also the result of superior mental fitness, including the ability to maintain proper focus, manage physical pain, set appropriate goals, and maintain high levels of motivation. Oddly, this aspect of triathlon performance is rarely addressed.

Figure 1 presents an integrated model of triathlon performance incorporating elements thought to be influential in predicting performance. These elements can be grouped under two broad headings: physical and cognitive. As a triathlete, physical variables are probably very familiar to you. Exercise physiologists have indicated that physical elements such as aerobic capacity ($VO_2\text{max}$), movement efficiency, and body composition are good predictors of endurance performance. Cognitive elements may be a bit less familiar to some readers. Cognition refers to the process of knowing, which can involve reasoning and judgment. Thoughts fall in the cognitive realm as well.

Less is known about the role that cognitive variables play in successful performance; however, research from the discipline of sport psychology indicates that cognitive fitness is also influential in determining performance. Moreover, it is now known that these two groups of variables (the physical and cognitive) are not distinct and that both interact to create successful performers. Studies have shown that belief in your ability to accomplish a task can have a positive effect on performance. For example, in a study of British weight lifters, athletes who were given a placebo but told they were taking steroid supplements achieved significant performance gains. At the mid-point of the study, half of the participants were informed that they had taken a placebo and performance in this group returned to normal levels. This research is just one example that solidly supports the link between athletes' beliefs during both training and competition and their ultimate performance. Studies on the effects of self-talk (see Chapter 4 for more on this topic) provide similar evidence of the interrelationship between cognitive processes and physical performance. Simply put, the power of positive thinking should not be underestimated.

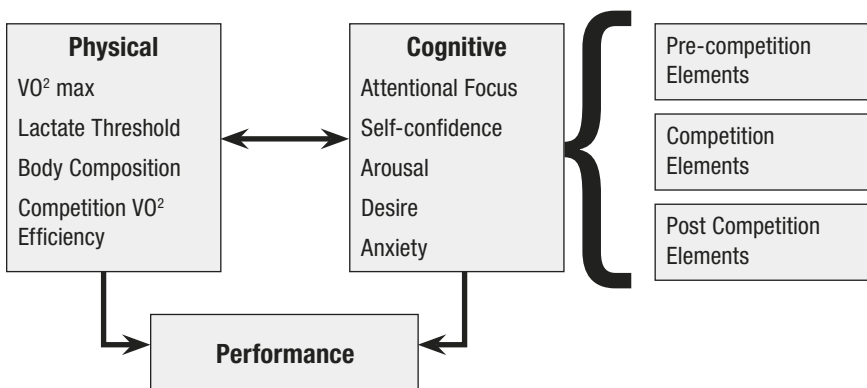
Numerous texts are available that examine the physical aspects of triathlon performance, and a brief list is presented in the *Further Reading* section of this book. These books and research articles generally provide a competent description of the physical aspects of triathlon training and competition. However, the primary focus of this book is on the cognitive component of the model presented in Figure 1. Let’s now turn to what we do know about the psychological elements of high-level athletes, including triathletes.

Psychological Characteristics of Elite Athletes

Research into the psychological attributes of champion athletes has suggested that elite athletes share a number of psychological dispositions. In general, elite athletes possess greater self-confidence, have less anxiety during and prior to competition, have greater concentration on goals and movements, and have a better ability to cope with poor performance, and think in much more positive ways.

Triathletes are exceptionally good at training their bodies to accommodate the physical aspects of triathlon performance. On the other hand, few athletes consider training for the cognitive aspects of performance. One of the underlying principles on which this book is based is that *mental skills, like physical skills, are learned and perfected through purposeful training.*

Figure 1.1: Physical and Cognitive Variables Affecting Triathlon Performance



It is a common misconception that successful athletes are born with the abilities that make them successful. Successful endurance athletes are often referred to as having a 'killer instinct' that allows them to succeed under competitive situations. The ability to focus under pressure or deal with anxiety is commonly misconstrued as being an innate skill. Actually, recent research indicates that athletes in possession of these enviable capacities likely acquired them through dedicated practice rather than being born with them. Recent research from our lab examining the development of elite Ironman triathletes indicates that specific skills required for success in triathlon are highly sport-specific and can only be acquired through numerous hours of training. As succinctly stated by Vidal Sassoon, (yes, *that* Vidal Sassoon) "The only place success comes before work is in the dictionary."

What is Sport Psychology?

Collectively, the term *sport psychology* refers to all cognitive aspects of sport participation, ranging from broad concepts such as the psychological benefits of sport involvement (e.g., increased self-esteem) to specific items like the effects of pre-competition routines on forms of anxiety. Sport psychologists examine human behavior in sport and strive to help athletes and coaches apply relevant knowledge within sport settings. However, this book has a very applied focus and will examine a component of sport psychology referred to as psychological skills training (PST). PST is specifically related to the cognitive variables associated with human performance. For example, how does nervousness before a race influence your ability to get into your optimal performance zone? Or, does arriving early to the race better prepare you for the day's competition? These are just two of the questions that fall within the realm of PST.

It has been our experience that some athletes are resistant to sport psychology. Whether this is because they believe that answers to performance issues can only be resolved through increases or modifications to their physical training regimens or because they believe that sport psychology is a 'bunch of hocus pocus' is unknown. However, we would like to clarify two of the more common misconceptions about sport psychology and its value to triathletes.

Misconception #1–Sport psychology is touchy-feely rubbish that is useless in real sports.

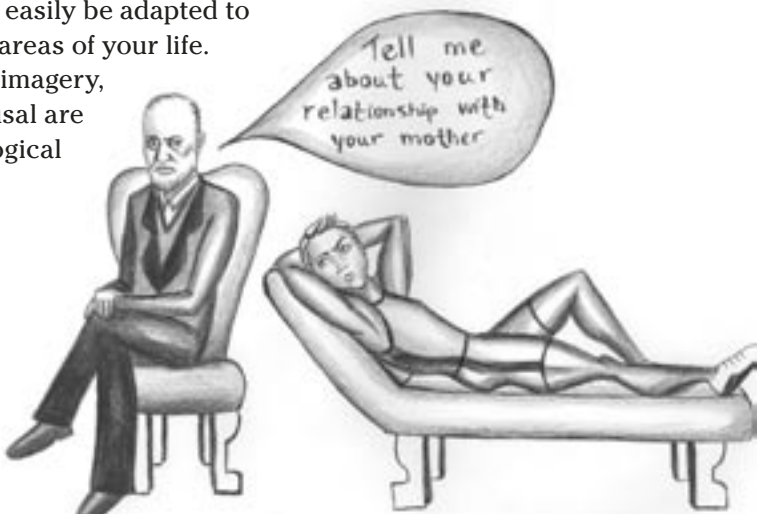
In actuality, sport psychology principles and guidelines are grounded in applied and laboratory research, just like physiological principles. Today, research in sport psychology is scientifically reliable, and sport psychology has taken its place as a valid discipline in the field of kinesiology. Sport psychology has incorporated elements from the sport sciences (such as exercise physiology and biomechanics) and from psychology (such as the developmental and counseling sub-domains). Many of the exercises and issues identified in this book were generated through focus groups with current triathletes from various levels. We have attempted to provide information that is relevant and the result of current psychological theory.

Misconception #2–Sport psychology is only useful for elite athletes.

This misconception is simply not true. Athletes of all levels have used sport psychology principles to achieve performance improvements. It is helpful if you think of forms of mental training as similar to forms of physical training. Just as running intervals can help athletes of all ages and ability levels, learning to maintain focus or manage arousal during competition can also improve performance in triathletes of all ages and ability levels.

You may notice that although the exercises we provide are specific to triathlon training and competition, they can easily be adapted to fit other areas of your life.

Anxiety, imagery, and arousal are psychological factors



encountered under performance conditions regardless of whether you are racing or speaking at a board meeting. We encourage you to take the exercises described in this book and apply them to your daily living outside of triathlon.

How to Use This Book

It is our assumption in writing this book that those who are reading it are willing to try the exercises provided in each chapter. Ideally, this book will allow you to become more familiar with the principles of sport psychology, particularly as they apply to your triathlon training and performance. This book *should not* be seen as a substitute for a qualified sport psychologist. Acquiring a competent personal sport psychologist would likely be far more beneficial than any book could ever attempt to be. As we have already mentioned and will continue to mention throughout this book, each individual athlete is highly complex. Consequently, the skills necessary for successful performance for one athlete are not necessarily the skills required by another. We are aware that the majority of triathletes are not able or inclined to use the services of a personal sport psychologist. Therefore, we have attempted to provide exercises that are applicable to triathletes of all ages and ability levels. You can copy the pages to use again if you want to measure your progress over time, or to make handouts for others. This way you can try the techniques and adapt them to accommodate your specific needs.

With the exception of the introduction and concluding chapters, each chapter is centered on a specific topic of triathlon psychology. Exercises are presented to help you develop specific psychological skills to be used in the appropriate situations. Collectively, the book presents a detailed plan for developing and integrating psychological skills. We encourage you to sample and modify the skills to create a plan that is tailored to your needs. Ready? Let's get started.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Athletes of any ability level can use sport psychology to maximize performance.
- Mental skills need to be learned and perfected through purposeful training over extended periods of time.