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Sports Psychology

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Introduction to Mental Fitness

There is a great deal that could be written about the mental side of exercising and competing. However, rather than overload you with ideas and instructions, the following will simply highlight some of the more important points that relate to helping you get the most out of your Indoor Rower from the psychological perspective. If this information raises your interest, and you want to get more detailed insights in the psychology of sport, then *The Mental Game Plan: Getting Psyched for Sport* is a really useful starting point (available from www.sportsdynamics.co.uk). All of the information in the book, and set out below is designed to be simple, practical ideas that can be integrated into the training that you might already be doing.

Here is what we are going to introduce you to:

- Why Bother with Psychological Training?
- Setting Targets and Goals - the Basic Tips.
- Concentration Tips for Use on the Indoor Rower.
- Building your Confidence/Monitoring Progress.
- Competition Specific Psychology - Performance Reviews.

All of the information you will read here should be common sense, but unfortunately, it is not commonly applied. Therefore, the biggest challenge you will have, as with all advice, is sticking with the recommendations, and giving them enough time in order that they can start to have a real benefit for you.

Why Bother with Psychological Training?

The mind is the athlete... the body simply the means to performance.

We spend a great deal of time warming the body up, stretching, fuelling it, and generally ensuring that the body is going to endure the stresses of our work-outs. How much attention do we pay to warming-up mentally for exercise? Usually very little! Why don't we do this? Usually because no-one has told us how to! Therefore, this section will show you how you can make the most of your mental muscles to help you have the best impact on your physical muscles!

On the most simple level, what you think influences what you actually do. So if you are wanting to have really high quality, consistent training on your Indoor Rower, you will have to exert some mental effort to ensure that this is what you get. A period of planning, some occasional reviewing, and a lot of self-talk while you are exercising need to be natural elements of your training programme. The more you can be strong in your thinking, approaching your training with purpose and conviction, the more you will get out of every session you do. Most people get maximum enjoyment from seeing that they are making good progress, so you need to make sure that you set up your training in such a way that you allow your mind to see how well you are improving session by session.

You will be exerting a good amount of physical effort during your training, and we are sure you will get added benefits from the time you invest if you are able to make sure that you get the appropriate psychological impact too.

Before we get into specific advice, it's worth highlighting a couple of useful principles that you need to keep checking you are successfully achieving from time to time.

First, managing your expectations of the progress you are going to make is really important. Too often people expect too much of themselves too quickly, and are therefore disappointed in the progress they make. People tend to focus on what they have not achieved, rather than the progress they have made. So, make sure you are keeping the progress you have made very much in the forefront of your thinking. You can make progress every day, and if you achieve that a few days per week, after several weeks that will be adding up to a good overall achievement.

Another important mindset tip to keep focused on is that your attitude is a choice. Therefore, how you perceive your exercise and training, and what you believe you can achieve, is very much based down to the attitude you chose to adopt. Don't expect to alter negative attitudes into positive ones immediately, but work on developing a more positive attitude over time as you build up evidence from the efforts that you are making. You are taking on a great challenge with your training, so look forward to it and see how far you can push yourself. Also, keep an eye on your attitude and monitor it so that you can keep making positive choices with it so that it keeps working for you on your quest for fitness.

It is very clear in all types of performance that if you can get your mind right, it is much easier to get the body right. It's therefore important that you think about the key mental elements that need to be in place in order for you to get your body as prepared as possible. There are key factors such as confidence, concentration and motivation that need to be constantly checked to help you understand differences in your training performance. Equally, when it comes to actually racing, you would need to think about controlling nerves, maintaining belief, and managing pain responses. Within your exercise and training time, if you can include some focus upon your developing mental fitness it will be of great help to your short-term and long-term success.

At the simplest level, it is critical that you identify some personal outcomes that will be important to you when you achieve them. Starting with your final aims clearly in mind will undoubtedly make a big impact for you. This is the first step of the goal-setting process that you will be introduced to, and you should take some time working out this key first step. Along with this, you will need to make sure that you regularly look back at what you have already achieved, and aim to learn as much as possible about how you get the most out of your training, as quickly as possible. With learning, you will be able to make strong choices relating to the type of training you really get a buzz from, and which training sessions you find a struggle. You can then plan accordingly to work out ways of keeping the fun sessions fun, and the tough sessions as enjoyable as possible for you. The main focus of staying switched on to your training is to ensure that it remains your training programme. Too often people believe they are carrying out something that they should do when it comes to regular training, rather than doing something that they completely want to do. This subtle, but important difference needs to be constantly focused upon in order that you maintain ownership of your programme and keep really enjoying your training, week in, week out.

Setting Targets and Goals - the Basic Tips

Goals and targets are essential for getting motivated and keeping motivated. Without targets, there is nothing to aim for specifically, and little chance of you maintaining training over a prolonged period. The more meaningful you can make your goals to you, then the more they will keep you striving to achieve

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those things that are really important to you. You have already taken the step of exercising on the Indoor Rower, or perhaps even purchasing one, so there must be some pretty important goals that you want to achieve. At the start of your training, it is well worth spending a small amount of time getting these goals into sharp focus so that you can maximise their impact for you, short-term, medium-term and long-term.

Goal Guides

Whether your goal is to control weight, improve general fitness levels, or be able to break eight, seven or even six minutes for a 2,000m row, there are some basic rules that you need to follow.

First, you need to start the goal-setting process with the finish point in mind. This makes it a lot easier for you to take the appropriate steps to set effective goals along the way. Try to make this end goal as specific as possible. For example, a goal of losing weight is pretty non-specific. How much weight? By when? And how? Your goal will be much more helpful if you give yourself detailed aims, such as: "By three months from today, I aim to have lost 5kg. I will do this by rowing four times a week and by working on improving my diet."

When we have a specific goal like this, you can then begin to calculate what you need to do on a day-to-day basis in order to achieve your long-term success. Therefore, if you want to achieve the 5kg weight loss in three months, this actually means that you will be aiming to lose 1.6kg per month, which in turn means you are trying to lose 0.4kg per week, or 0.06 kg per day! And what does 60 grams feel like? Well, if you have an average apple available, pick this up, and 60g is about half the weight of this apple! So, from a large goal of 5kg, that might seem quite daunting, you might hopefully be able to be more optimistic that you can little by little make the 60g daily progress that would add up to your desired total.

Think of the ultimate goal as the top of a staircase, and in order to successfully reach the top of your stairs, you need to take each step with maximum efficiency, allowing you to tackle each step with equal enthusiasm. So, apply the staircase principle to any goal you set. See what is at the top, and then break the ultimate aim down into manageable daily or weekly chunks. If you adhere to the following rules along the way, you will be sure to get maximum satisfaction out of your goals:

- Make sure your goals are realistic, but challenging. Getting the balance right here is essential. Too easy, and the goals will not motivate or create a sense of urgency. Too hard, and the goals will demotivate as you will not get any positive feedback that you are getting close to achieving your ideal outcome. Therefore, keep asking yourself, does this goal challenge me, and do I believe it is realistic?
- Progress towards goals is never smooth - sometimes you make quicker progress than expected, other times you are hindered in your efforts. Therefore, make sure that you allow the time frames and the goals to be adjustable. Allowing flexibility is critical as goal setting is often like an experiment, and as we know with most experiments, the scientists seldom get the method perfect first time round.
- As much as possible, make sure you measure your progress. In the weight loss example, there is a good objective progress check in terms of actual weight measurement. Use times, distances, frequency of training, or your performance rating scales to keep you focused on measuring your successes. If you can see the end goal getting closer, then the more motivated you will be.

- Review, review, review! Check your progress along the way. Don't set long term goals and only review progress once you get to the end point. Keep reviewing progress regularly so that you can learn what is working for you and what is not. The world's best sports performers get their goals really working for them through the way that they review and learn, so take a tip from the best, and review as well as you set goals. Later in this section, there is an example of a race review system, and you might want to work out how this might be adapted to help you review your goals effectively along the way, even if you have no intention of racing.

There is a lot more detail on the kind of goal setting you can go through in *The Mental Game Plan*. One area that may help you though is to think about working out in more detail what your starting point is as an individual beginning a programme of training. The Concept 2 Profile (see below) is a great way to get some more specific targets for your training that are personalised to your particular needs.

The profile is relatively easy to fill in. Under the training focus, complete a list of all of those specific areas that you might want to work on. For instance, you might identify that you want to work on: stamina, muscle tone, weight control, back strength, enjoyment, concentration and motivation. If this was your list, you would then need to score yourself out of ten on each item for how good you believe yourself to be right now on each quality. Once you have identified the scoring range, look at the lowest scores, and start to put in place a plan for the next few weeks of what you will do to improve the scores of those specific areas. This process is much more subjective than using the goal highlighted before, but it can be equally helpful as it really gets you in touch with the areas to work on that are most important for you. This process allows you to tell yourself what is important to you... and from a motivation point of view that is much better than someone telling you what to do and how to do it.

Once you've completed the profile you should have a clear picture of what you want to improve, what score you want to improve it to, how you will improve it (while keeping other areas at least at the same level), and when you will review your progress to score yourself on each other areas again.

The time spent on this planning stage will have a big impact on the quality with which you are going to carry out your training. So take out your insurance policy and spend a bit of time thinking about what you need to think about!

Concentration Tips for Use on the Indoor Rower

One of the biggest challenges that people face in sport and exercise is staying concentrated on the right things at the right time. The Indoor Rower presents some unique concentration challenges that you need to prepare for so that you can control your machine, and not let it control you!

The most important thing to focus on in any training session that you carry out is the process of rowing effectively. The more you can be aware of what it feels like to row effectively, and be in touch with your body's reactions, the more you will get out of the session. It is important therefore, that you have an aim of concentrating on your body and the various bits of feedback it gives you through the course of a session. The more you concentrate on these variables, the more you will be able to regulate your performance, become more efficient, and take advantage of your developing fitness. Therefore, for the first few training sessions, you will need to pay attention to what it takes to produce an efficient and effective work-out. Pick out the concentration cues that help you to feel relaxed, strong and get you into a good rowing rhythm. This might mean concentrating on a specific part of your body as you go through the stroke, it might mean concentrating on a particular sound that indicates the rhythm you are creating, or it might mean concentrating on saying something to yourself, or watching yourself in a mirror. Different people have different concentration preferences, so experiment a little and work out which works best for you, and how you prefer to concentrate. Set yourself the challenge of seeing how much of a session you can concentrate on the right things for. In time you should be able to concentrate more and more effectively on the processes that really work for you.

The other important concentration challenge with the Indoor Rower is how you concentrate on the information being displayed on the monitor during your work-out. It is important that you make some decisions about how you will use the information on the monitor during your work-out. If you concentrate too much on the numbers alone, you are probably diluting the amount of concentration you are using to row efficiently. In competitions, this can be particularly important as a small decrease in concentration might make an impact on your final performance. Be prepared to experiment with the monitor to see how it influences your concentration. If it helps to have the constantly updated feedback of how you are doing, then you should play to that need, but if the numbers distract you too easily, and result in you decreasing effort, then try putting tape over the monitor to cover those areas that you find most distracting or simply turn the whole thing over.

You'll really improve the quality of your work-outs if you get the right concentration focus. The most important thing is to try to stay in the present as much as possible. If you can take each session one stroke at a time, and concentrate on carrying each stroke out really well, then you will find the sessions much more rewarding, and likely to be over more quickly! If you are concentrating on how long or how far you still have to go throughout a session, then your focus will not be helping you as much. If staying in the present becomes really important, from time to time turn the monitor over, and set an alarm to sound when you want your session to finish. With no visual feedback all the way through the workout, you will be able to concentrate much more on taking one stroke at a time, and concentrating on getting the most out of your body.

Concentration is really all about having specific things to focus on throughout a workout. The more you have clear goals of what you want to think about for each training session, then the more effectively you will be able to concentrate. This idea is certainly made more compelling when thinking of carrying out a 2,000m race. As you can see below with the blank ideal race plan, you have the opportunity with a race to clearly decide ahead of time what you want to be concentrating on throughout the whole 2,000m. The idea

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of the race plan is to decide what the things are that you want to be focusing on through the specific parts of the race. Once you know how you like to concentrate, and what makes you really stay in the present, you can fill in your ideal set of concentration cues for the whole race. Your job then is to see how effectively you can stay concentrated on these cues for the whole race. The concentration cues identify the process that you want to go through in order to produce the best outcome that you are capable of at that time. And, if you get the process right, the outcome will take care of itself. For those of you competing, I would recommend using the race plan approach and testing out how good your concentration abilities are. For those of you not competing, you can use the same principles to help you to identify the general kinds of things that you need to think about in order to have an enjoyable and effective work-out.

In time you will get better and better at concentrating your way through training sessions, and as a result you are bound to get more benefit. Your brain is going to want something to think about while you are rowing, so as often as is right for you, make sure you tell it what it needs to think about! There will be other times when you just want to switch off completely and let your body go through the work-out. Having time to just think about the day's events while your body gets a good work-out is a great stress relief, so if you need this kind of approach to thinking while you are on your Indoor Rower, make sure you take advantage of the time you schedule in for yourself!

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Building your Confidence/Monitoring Progress

Confidence with anything is the best kind of motivation. The more that you perceive that you are benefiting from something and growing in confidence, the more likely you are to keep doing that activity. Therefore, having set your goals, it is important you use these to help build your confidence as your fitness improves.

The key confidence tips are very simple ones, but maybe not as easy to stick with! First, it is really important to have a simple outlook that forces you to always value what you have achieved already. Too often, when people are exercising, they only see what they have not achieved, and how far they are from their end goal. If you have set your goals well, and are reviewing regularly, you will be giving yourself a great opportunity to be proud of the progress you have made on each of the days carried out so far, or evaluate your programme if you are not making progress. Make sure you keep looking back to see how far you have come, and really take pride in this. If you can maintain that outlook it will be much easier for you to approach the next session full of the confidence you have built from making such good progress to date. You should use all of the positives around you to help build confidence. Focus on when someone tells you that you are looking fitter; notice how much fitter you feel as you climb stairs; be aware of how good your body feels as a result of regular exercise; be confident that your body is in better shape than many of the people you know. All of these kinds of little things begin to add up over time. Within your training sessions, take confidence from the small steps forward you take - more distance covered in your usual time; feeling fitter even though you have produced the same scores; being more consistent in your rhythm when rowing. Again, there are many small things you can focus on, so make sure you pat yourself on the back for all of them.

As you set goals and achieve them, build a foundation of confidence. Don't just ignore the achievement of the goal - take the time to enjoy it! The more goals you can set, the more opportunity you have to build confidence.

Some people like to see progress, so you might want to keep graphs, or wall charts that show your progress over time, or how many metres you have rowed every week. Other people like to test themselves out from time to time with a specific session to see how far they have moved on. Whatever your preferred method of monitoring progress, make sure you do it! And importantly, work out how you have made the progress. If you know what you have achieved and how you have achieved it, then you should be confident that you can do more of the same. Simple ideas, simple to implement, but again you just have to build it in as part of your exercise time.

The more confidence you can take from your regular exercise, the more benefit you will get from your training programme, and many people report how they feel more confident in other areas of their life as a result of training regularly, so set yourself the challenge to see how far you can make your confidence epidemic spread!

Competition Specific Psychology - Performance Reviews

If you are training with the intention of competing, the psychology of racing is a critical performance influence that you need to consider. Your thoughts and feelings on the day of your race will certainly influence how effectively you are able to perform to your potential. Although there are a great many different elements of psychology that you can consider from a preparatory point of view perhaps the most useful element of racing psychology that you can engage in is that of reviewing your performance effectively.

Below you will see a very simple Race Review System that revolves around the idea that you need to answer the question:

"How well did I do what I said I was going to do?"

In order to be able to answer this question, you obviously have to have some intended targets for the performance in the first place. Without these, the question cannot be answered after you have completed the race. So, unless you are taking the goal-setting ideas and concentration cue ideas from earlier, and putting them into action for races, you will not be able to make use of the review section.

The importance of the review question cannot be overstated, as it really helps you to develop the idea that confidence needs to be all about "how much do I believe that I can put into action what I say I am going to do?". If you can answer this "100% belief" then you will truly be a confident competitor. You will be able to develop this belief over time by going through the goal-setting and performance reviewing process, so that more and more you will be able to decide on race strategies that play to your strengths, and you will be increasingly confident that you can race to your potential by identifying the right concentration and motivation cues for you.

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Race Review System

Name: _____ Event: _____

Date: _____ Competition _____ Start Time: _____ am/pm

Finish Position: _____ Finish Time/Winning Time: _____

Environment: _____

Key Warm-up/Preparation Details: _____

Key Race Objectives	Positive Outcomes	Negative Outcomes

Training pointers: _____

Future racing reminders: _____

Overall satisfaction level of performance (not result): _____ %

A very important part of the race review is to include a review of your preparation prior to the race. It is well accepted that consistent preparation for races will lead to consistent performances, so you need to learn from what you do before the race to make sure that you are able to do the right things before starting, as well as during the race. You should view your race as beginning a couple of hours ahead of the actual start time. If you can get in control, and stay in control of your preparation all the way up to the start time, then it is significantly easier to maintain this theme of being in control once you start to execute your race plan. So, make sure you review the whole race, and not just the result.

The review system helps you to focus on both the process of the race and the outcome of the race. It is important that you take your confidence from your ability to execute the process, and trust again that the outcome will take care of itself. If you review the process in detail, focusing on how well you did and what you said you were going to do, then you will learn much more about what influences your performance, and you will be able to identify the things that you need to focus on in training that will make a big difference next time around.

The positive outcomes and negative outcomes element of the review system are very simple concepts and also have some simple rules to guide their use. With the positive outcomes, make sure you list all of the positives that emerge. We tend to overlook many positive things in performance, and you should be looking to have your review heavily weighted in the positive direction. With the negative outcomes, these are usually easier to identify, but from a confidence and motivation perspective you need to ensure that you consider the negatives and make some strong decisions relating to what you will do to combat this negative happening again, or how you can make use of existing strengths to eradicate the problem totally. If you like, it is often useful to decide on positive action to take relating to the negative outcomes, and then discard the negative list totally. With this approach, you are only left with positive reminders of the performance, and positive action that you have taken to bring about improvements. Dwelling on negatives is unlikely to be a useful response!

As I have said before, these ideas are full of common sense, however, they are not easy to apply. If you are going to make the most of the review process, you do have to use it regularly, and really follow through with the things that you believe are most important to you. As you race more and more, the number of reviews that you will build up will become a really useful resource, and will help you learn the key lessons that will help you improve your level of performance as quickly as possible, but more importantly, help you to develop consistency in your racing performances.

The mental side of your racing and training is worthy of consideration. The Indoor Rower is a great way to develop mental fitness as well as physical fitness, so make sure you are getting the maximum benefit from it. Using a little mental effort will certainly help you enjoy the physical effort that much more!

Recommended Reading

- **Stephen J. Bull, John G. Albinson, Christopher J. Shambrook : *The Mental Game Plan: Getting Psyched for Sport***
Sports Dynamics, 1996
ISBN: 951954326

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