**The Psychology of Racing and Winning.**

John Landy, the Australian runner who was the second man to break the 4 minute barrier for the mile , once said “ I would prefer to lose a very fast race than win a slow one .”

The day before the Olympic 800m.final in Moscow, Steve Ovett was asked if he had any realistic hope of winning the race , considering the fact that he was a full 4 seconds slower than Seb Coe. Ovett replied “ Well it’s not a Grand Prix type of time trial : this is real championship racing . The time will probably be quite slow, and I don’t care if it’s 1:45 or 1:55 or even 2 minutes -as long as I win !” He did.

Those two statements epitomise the difference between a pacer and a racer. One was more concerned about the stop -watch , the other was the consummate winner who didn’t care what the time was - provided he won .

When Fermin Cacho won the Olympic 1500m.title in 1992 , his winning time of 3:42.12 was the slowest since our own Ron Delaney won in 3:41.2 a full 36 years earlier. Do you think Cacho was concerned by the “slow” time ?

Clonliffe’s Colm Rooney won the National Senior 1500m.title in 2008 in 3:58 after a funereal early pace . It was the slowest in living memory , but Rooney ,like Cacho, was not concerned .He was the Champion and nobody could take that Gold medal from him.

Both of these examples illustrate the fact that, in a race, the main purpose of the exercise is to WIN ! And the winning mind thinks “ That is all that matters”.

The winner’s mentality says “ failing to win is unacceptable”. Ian Stewart ( European and Commonwealth 5000m.Champion ) is on record as saying “ First is first and Second is nowhere”. The famous American football coach , Vince Lombardi, summed it up when he stated **“ Winning isn’t everything ; but wanting to win is the only thing”.**

In his book , “Winner Stakes All”, Lynn Davies , the 1964 Olympic Long Jump champion , describes how he reacted to Bob Beamon’s phenomenal winning effort in the Mexico Games in 1968. Davies had been reasonably confident of defending his title: only himself , Ralph Boston , Igor Ter-Ovanesyan and a college kid called Bob Beamon , had ever broken 27 feet (8.23 metres), Boston being the first . He was sitting beside Boston when Beamon unleashed a monster leap . Davies knew it was long but wasn’t very familiar with metric distances . The result came up on the electronic scoreboard : 8.90 metres . Davies turned to Boston and said “ My God ! That’s over 28 feet “. Boston turned to him and said “ You’re wrong man : that’s over 29 feet”. And so it was : 29 feet 2.5 inches to be precise . Beamon had broken the world record by a margin of 55cm. ( 21.75 inches ) ! Davies admitted that at that moment his competition ended : “ I knew the rest of us were competing for Silver and Bronze – and I just wasn’t interested”.

His reaction is interesting for at least two reasons: some might argue that his reaction was very negative and that he threw in the towel. But Davies himself was adamant that, as a competitor with a winner’s mind , he simply was not interested in anything other than the Gold- and he knew that the Gold was gone. *( I imagine most coaches, especially the coaches of young athletes, would not agree with this* attitude: *they would try to inculcate a mentality of fighting for every place and never giving up ).* Incidentally , Beamon himself partly attributed his extraordinary feat to the role of the mind : he said “ Exceptional athletes do not place the same subconscious limits on their performance as others do” . We might remember this in the year when a number of attempts will be made to run a 2 hour marathon : it would be very foolish to think that it is virtually impossible.

The big question , however, is ” Can this winning mentality be developed ?” It is generally agreed that your basic philosophy about winning and losing , about racing and pacing, will be determined partly by genes and partly by training. The athlete must develop the willpower and mental discipline required to endure arduous physical training and competition. **Remember that you are always competing against others and against yourself .**Some athletes “mentally sabotage” themselves. You hear them saying “ I can’t run on mud” or “ I can’t run track” ,etc., etc. They should listen to David Bedford ( World record for the 10000m.of 27:30.8 in 1973) “ I don’t care where the race is run: it can be on a track , a manicured lawn, my back garden or up the bloody stairs : if I’m a runner I can run it “ !

**Mental attitude :**

Tim Noakes ( author of **Lore of Running** , one of the seminal works on athletics ) wrote “ Despite all I have written about preparing the body for running, I suspect that the preparation of the mind is the more important factor determining running success”. Noakes once asked Roger Bannister what is the limiting factor in human exhaustion : Bannister replied “ Of course it is the brain; the brain determines how hard the exercise systems can be pushed”.

Gunder Hagg ( who had set a world record of 3:43.0 for the 1500 in 1944 and a world record of 4:01.4 for the mile in 1945 ) wrote ,shortly before Bannister ran the first Sub.4, “ Though physiology may indicate respiratory and cardiovascular limits to muscular effort , **psychology and other factors** beyond the ken of physiology set the razor’s edge of defeat or victory and determine how closely the athlete approaches the absolute limits of performance.” In the same article he said “ Bannister uses his brains as much as his legs . I’ve always thought that the 4 minute mile is more of a psychological problem than a test of physical endurance”. Hagg believed that Bannister was the man to smash that mental barrier – and ,of course, he was proved correct.

**Nick Bideau** has listed a number of characteristics which is usually found in a champion athlete . They are :

\* Fierce competitor. \* Mentally strong \* Disciplined and determined .

\*Strong character that also has the capacity to relax under pressure .\* Natural talent /Good genes.

\* Intelligence . \* Ability to listen and take advice . \*A single minded focus to succeed .

\* Attitude : can enjoy victory but can also get over losses quickly and move on to the next challenge .

\* Guidance : has the right influences inside and outside running. It is interesting that of those 10 qualities , at least 8 of them are in the realm of the mind.

Some would argue that the winning mind stems from an insatiable desire or hunger for victory , a desire that compels the athlete to overcome every adversity ,every setback , every pain or discomfort. Writing about Emil Zatopek’s extraordinary ability to tolerate pain Richard Askwith , in his book  **“ Today We Die a Little- the inimitable Emil Zatopek” ,**  says  *“ That ,in a nutshell, is what makes a champion a champion : that strange irreducible lust for victory that dispels everything from fear to fatigue . When utterly fatigued and in great pain, most of* *us would think of excuses ,of damage limitation, perhaps even coming to terms with defeat . The* *champion seeks a new route to victory.”*

Ayrton Senna was the same : James Barraclough writing of Senna says *“ Once he was focused he didn’t feel any pain or stress -nothing” .*Andre Agassi, in his magnificent autobiography , **Open,** describes how he played some matches in extreme pain ( he had a back problem ) but he says ” the pain in my back was less than the pain at the fear of losing” and so he played on ,usually to win. Jockeys like A.P.McCoy and Ruby Walsh have often ridden in races despite being in intense pain . Franz Stampfl’s final words to Roger Bannister before he stepped onto the Iffley Road track on that fateful night of May 6th. 1954 were “ You will feel pain Roger ; but what is it only pain.” We often hear the old cliché ”Mind over matter” , but what exactly does it mean ?- and can athletes be trained to make themselves so mentally strong that they can overcome physical shortcomings ?

Indeed, if the role of the mind is so important should athletes not be training their minds as well as training their bodies ? According to Tutko and Tosi, \* most athletes are “ physically over-educated but emotionally undereducated”. (\* “Sports Psyching” by Thomas Tutko Ph.D. and Umberto Tosi, 1976). And, according to our old friend ,that eminent coach of over 400 years ago , W.Shakespeare , “ All things are ready if our minds be so”. ( Henry V ) .

So , how can the athlete develop a winning ,or indeed , a racing mentality ? It is generally agreed that there are **FIVE** mental characteristics which the athlete must develop. They are :

**1.Confidence. 2. Motivation. 3. Controlled Aggression . 4 . Anxiety Management. 5. Relaxation.**

1.The confidence necessary to become a winner comes from knowing that you have trained properly and optimally . You will feel confident if you are well prepared , if you have been able to complete tough sessions without running yourself to exhaustion and if you have won a number of races in the build up to the major one. You will feel confident if you have left no stone unturned in your preparations. “ A win is a win” is a truism but there is no doubt that winning builds confidence. As Laro Byrne often said “ Winning is a habit”. You must also rid yourself of doubts about your readiness. Carl Lewis said “ If you don’t have confidence , you will always find a way not to win.” Of course , nobody wins all the time , but it is our **reaction to defeat** that determines how we will do the next time we compete . As Nick Bideau says the champion can get over losses quickly and move on to the next challenge . Your belief system will be imprinted with a winner’s image or a loser’s image depending on how you react to previous experiences. The Liverpool manager , Jurgen Klopp, said recently : ” Defeat is not the problem; your ***reaction***  to it is the problem”. Seb Coe is on record as saying “ The seeds of reincarnation often lie in adversity. Each race is a unique experiment…. ….Improvement depends on continuous self-discipline by the athlete himself and acute observations of reactions to races and training and above all on judgement w**hich he must learn for himself. By learning from mistakes ,often unconsciously, I discovered my reaction to many of the situations I was likely to meet in big races”.**  Jim Valvano , the American basketball player and coach, often gave an inspiring talk, the gist of which was  ***“Never give up ! Failure and rejection are only the first step to succeeding”.***  And Ted Williams , the famous American baseball player (and later coach ) used to say “ Just keep going . Everybody gets better if they keep at it.” Your reaction to any event is vitally important. Even during the course of a race , your reaction to developments can determine whether you win or lose . If you have thrown in a surge, opened a gap and think you have shaken off your opponents, it can be demoralising to find that someone suddenly appears on your shoulder again with just 200m. to go . So how do you react ? Do you say “ Damn ; I thought I had it, I’ll never shake him off”. Or do you think “Well , it has taken him this long to catch me ; I must be good – and the effort to catch me must have taken quite a bit out of him.” Negative or positive thoughts: they can make a huge difference . As Liebetrau said “Emotions put the fuel in the tank and thoughts provide the steering and other skills of driving”. Sports psychologist such as Ziegler suggests that successful athletes engage in what is called “Thought Stopping” which basically is getting rid of all negative thoughts and replacing them with positive ones. As the old song said *“ Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative , don’t mess with Mister In-Between” !*

Confidence also comes from being in control , from being proactive and being organised .A previous article dealt with the manner in which athletes can develop a feeling of being in control. Changes in routine can undermine confidence. Young international runners can often be upset by a snoring room mate ,hotel central heating, cafeteria food , transport delays , etc., etc. Part of the process of becoming a seasoned international competitor is learning to control or come to terms with these irritants. They should try to expend energy in a **positive way a**nd look for  **viable options and alternatives** instead of wasting emotional energy by complaining and achieving no solution. I remember meeting Caitríona McKiernan in Albufeira many years ago on the day before the Almond Blossom Cross-Country Grand Prix. ( Clonliffe were there for the European Clubs’ Championships ). Most athletes were complaining about the thunder storm and torrential winds which had kept them awake the night before ; Caitríona said she had slept like a log as she always put ear plugs in her ears before going to bed when she was about to compete away from home . **Preparation and attention to detail !** Champions pay attention to seemingly minor details which others ignore. So, as outlined in that previous article on Racing , control the things you can control, try to eliminate the variables, make a check-list and then go to sleep !

**2.Motivation .**

Different individuals are motivated by different things . Motivation must come primarily from within the athlete himself or herself. While many of us have met coaches or managers who were great motivators (and feel great gratitude to them for the manner in which they inspired us ) yet, in the final analysis, if an athlete is to endure the Long Hard Road ( as Ron Hill called the journey to athletic success ) the driving force , the burning fire must essentially come from within . There are so many stories of what inspired sports people to persevere in spite of setbacks and disappointments: some wished to make a loved one proud of them , some wanted to do something in memory of a departed relative or friend, some wished to raise funds for some worthwhile cause , others wanted to prove somebody wrong ( “ I’ll show that bas\*\*\*d” ! ) , etc., etc. Robert Heffernan , in his fine autobiography “Walking Tall”, tells us that he was motivated to prove a guidance teacher wrong , a guidance teacher who had laughed at him when he said that he wanted to win an athletics scholarship to America and he also wanted to show his own sceptical family that he was good enough to become an international athlete . Tom Brady , probably the greatest quarterback in American Football history , was the most unlikely individual to rise to the top of his sport. Writing about Brady recently , the superb sports writer Keith Duggan said “ Brady has been omnipotent for so long that it is easy to forget the obscurity of his early years. He was the Willie Loman who made it. Brady came to New England as the 199th.pick of the year 2000 draft. He wasn’t even the third-choice quarter back and only seemed likely to get game time if most of the team came down with influenza. His main assets were a f**ierce devotion to practice and preparedness and a self-belief that must have seemed like delusion to his team-mates”.** There is little doubt that one of the things which motivated Brady was the desire to prove his detractors wrong.

Champions are usually motivated by a burning desire to win and by an unquenchable belief in their own ability . Ayrton Senna admitted that he had an insatiable hunger for success. He had total belief in himself and in what he believed was a God given ability. In his book  **“ Ayrton Senna :Inside the Mind of a Champion” ,** James Barraclough describes Senna as being “ driven , determined and dedicated. He was also mentally tough  **and paid great attention to trifling details that others overlooked”.** (Like McKiernan and her ear plugs ). Ronnie Delaney always brought a toilet roll to races- just in case !

Many athletes use goal setting as their prime motivator. Like most coaches , I believe that **goals should be high enough to be challenging but low enough to be attainable.** They should also be very clear and specific. In my own modest career , I set myself what I called Time Targets and Performance Targets. A time target , for example , was to break 50 minutes for 10 miles. I ran very close to it on a number of occasions ( 50:11 being the closest I got ) but never actually achieved it . But the target kept me motivated ! A performance target ,on the other hand , was to make the Scoring Four on the Clonliffe team and win a National Senior Cross-Country gold medal. I can still remember the immense sense of satisfaction I felt when I achieved that goal in 1981. On a much higher level, A.P.McCoy ,in his autobiography ***Winner ,*** tells us that the goal that drove him on was to win the Jockeys’ Championship year after year . He also set himself other targets like riding 200 winners in a season ; in his final season he had set himself the incredible target of riding 300 winners and would probably have achieved it if he hadn’t suffered two horrific injuries which ruled him out of competition for some time.

Once you achieve a certain goal ,you can then realistically adjust your sights and aim higher . As Ayrton Senna said *“ You think you have a limit .As soon as you touch this limit something happens and suddenly you* can *go a little bit further .With your brain power , your determination ,instinct and experience , you can* *fly very high”.*

What bothers me ( or occasionally amuses me ) is to hear athletes talking about the high targets they have set themselves despite having achieved nothing that would realistically suggest they can achieve such targets . For example, there is not much point in setting yourself a target of breaking 1:50 for the 800 if you haven’t as yet even broken 2:00 ! Take it a step at a time : unless you are phenomenally talented , improvements usually occur in small increments. ( Of course the longer the competitive distance, the easier it is to make large improvements.) You should try to learn from each race , discuss it with your coach then set realistic goals based on recent training and racing performances.

**Martin Hagger\*** , a very respected Austalian sports psychologist , uses the acronym SMARTER to remind goal setters of how they should go about setting and attaining these goals:

**S=Specific; M=Meaningful; A=Agreed ; R=Relevant; T=Time-specific; E=Engaging; R=Recorded.**

So, a goal should be Specific , not vague or nebulous .( I’m aiming to break 2 minutes for the 800 ). It should be Meaningful : no point in setting a goal of 3:35 for the 1500 this season if you have never broken 4 minutes ! It must also be a target that really motivates the athlete , one that gets his juices running!, It should be Agreed : the athlete and coach should have the same target . They should be “on the same page”. It must be Relevant : again , there is no point in setting a target so high that it is unattainable. It should be Time-specific : if you haven’t achieved your target within a certain time frame it is unlikely that you’re going to do it . If your target is very high ,such as making the Olympics , you may have to put your life on hold for four or even eight years and give everything to your sport for that time span . But if you don’t achieve it , can you reasonably be expected to put your life on hold for another four years or longer ? We know “that if at first you don’t succeed , try ,try again” but how often should you try and how long should this process last ? It should be Engaging : this ,perhaps, is more relevant to team sports ( or to work colleagues ). Everybody involved in the endeavour must be fully convinced that the target or goal is worth pursuing . Everybody must be “on board” . I remember back in September 1975 the then Clonliffe captain ,Christy Brady, approaching each of us on the senior team and convincing us that we were ready to topple Donore from their perch as National Cross-Country champions( they had won the previous 8 titles in a row ). Christy convinced us that we should set aside any individual targets we might have for that season and throw ourselves fully into the project of winning the National team title. We agreed and the rest ,as they say , is history. Finally, it should be Recorded : athletes should keep a record of the progress they have made . Every serious athlete keeps a training diary in which he records each training run and each session as well as all other relevant data . A training diary can be a great source of motivation and ,indeed , it has also been described as a very good coach ! The athlete can look back and see what he was doing when things were going well , racing-wise, and should then replicate the training and life style which led to that successful period of competition. ***\*Martin Hager can be seen and heard talking about this in a Ted Talk on You Tube .***

The function of goal setting may be to convince the brain that the target race is very important for which it must allow for a performance that would not be allowed in training. The brain has been described as “our central governor” : Bannister was **able to convince his “central governor” that a Sub 4 was possible . He did this after running a 4:02 in a low-key schoolboy meet in 1953.** He knew that if he could do this in such inauspicious circumstances , he could certainly go sub 4 in more favourable conditions . John Landy , on the other hand , had run sub 4:03 on six occasions when he declared “ It’s a brickwall ; I shall not attempt it again”. Unlike Bannister , Landy was only able to convince his “ centralgovernor” that it was possible after someone else had done it first. But what is meant by the phrase “ it must allow for a performance that would not be allowed in training” ? It means two things : first , that one should not “ race one’s training” i.e. an athlete should not put the same effort into training as into a race and, second, that one must be prepared to push past the limits of pain that one might find intolerable in training . To quote Zatopek again : “It’s at the borders of pain and suffering that the men are separated from the boys”.

The first is very important : **champion athletes train very hard but they always appreciate the difference between training and** **racing .** Many of us have known great trainers who were incapable of transferring that form to the race situation. Champions ,on the other hand , are the athletes who can “pull something special out of the bag “ in response to competition . Carlos Lopez , for example, was a rather desultory trainer but when it came to a race he was a ferocious competitor , winning the Olympic Marathon and three World Cross-Country titles. Our own Pádraig Keane often reminded us that  ***“ Training is training , but racing is racing- and there’s a hell of a difference between the two”.***

The American discus thrower , Al Oerter , who won four consecutive Olympic gold medals in the discus ( 1956,’60,’64’68 ) , was possibly the greatest competitor in athletics history . He was almost killed in a car crash the year after his first Olympic victory but recovered in time to win his second gold in Rome .He was plagued by injuries before the Tokyo Games : first, he was bothered by a neck injury , then he tore cartilage in his ribs shortly before the Games began . Competing in great pain , Oerter set a new Olympic record and won his third gold medal. In Mexico, he was ranked well below his team mate Jay Silvester but , in the white hot heat of Olympic competition it was Oerter who came out on top with yet another Olympic record. He retired after that performance but,in 1980 ,at the age of 44, he came out of retirement to finish second in the “Boycott Olympic Games” in Philadelphia with a new PB of 69.46 m. Perhaps if it had been the real Olympics , instead of a competition which the USA staged as part of its boycott of Moscow ( in protest against the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan ) , Oerter might have come out on top again . Somehow, it’s hard to imagine this supreme competitor being able to really get himself psyched up for a poor alternative to the real thing ! It was only in the white hot heat of the toughest competition that Oerter could get the best out of himself .He certainly never produced his best throws in training .

A final example is given by Robert Heffernan in his aforementioned excellent biography “Walking Tall”. While training in South Africa with World and Olympic champion , Robert Korzeniowski, he very honestly admits that he was “mad to impress” the Polish maestro. Indeed he thought that Korzeniowski was at this stage “old and slow” ! One day , during a 30K.training session , Heffernan put the boot down at 28K and pulled away ,dropping everybody including the Olympic champion. When he finished some of the other Polish athletes started clapping sarcastically and calling him “our new champion”. Gradually , Heffernan copped on ; as he said “ My lactic was probably 6.1 at the end (of the session), while his ( Korzeniowski’s ) was maybe only 2.2 , which meant that while my legs were burning from lactic acid build up and was gasping for breath at the end , he had been walking within himself at a purposely comfortable level, so he didn’t allow that to happen”. This is a lesson that all champions have learned : **there is a huge difference between training and racing , so leave the racing for the races .** You must train your “Central Governor” to accept exactly what you have to do in the racesituation.

**3. Controlled Aggression .**

This means a single minded determination to prevail over the opposition at all costs within the rules. Aggression obviously can be good or bad : good ,if controlled; bad ,if not harnessed . We have all seen the footballer who allows the “red mist” to descend on him and gets himself sent off as a result of a stupid act of aggression against an opponent . Aggression is better directed inwards :we have all seen tennis players ,for instance , engage in “self-talk” , where they either berate themselves for a silly mistake or encourage themselves to greater effort . Percy Cerutty made the following observation of John Landy : “ He is a character capable of the greatest kindness ,gentleness and thoughtfulness, and on the other side- **as there always must be-** a ruthlessness and a ferocity *( albeit mostly vented on himself )*  which makes it possible for John to rise to sublime heights of physical endeavour”. I remember Laro Byrne often telling us “ In ordinary everyday life, at home or in school or in work , you should be a nice guy : helpful, polite , hard-working . But when you toe the line for a race , you should become a f\*\*king animal !”.

**4. Anxiety management :**

In a previous article ( the one on Racing ) a number of methods for relaxing before competition was discussed. One of the most important methods, perhaps, is **keeping things in perspective.**

In a recent ,very comprehensive interview which Paul Kimmage conducted with Rory McIlroy, ( published in The Sunday Independent on 15/1/2017) the latter describes his mind set when he won the US Open in 2011. McIlroy had become a UNICEF ambassador and a week before the competition he had spent a few days in Haiti which had been devastated by an earthquake in January 2010. McIlroy admits that this experience helped to put things in perspective for him as, during the competition, he often thought about what he had seen in Haiti. There was one particular shot he remembers : “ I was playing my second shot to the par 5 sixth - a three iron from 240 yards to a back pin. There was a water hazard to the right and I was thinking about laying up and then I thought : “ You’ve just been in a place where millions of people have no clean water and millions of kids get no education , and you’re nervous about hitting a golf ball into some water !” So I hit my three iron into the heart of the green and two putted for birdie. Shot 65”.

Keeping things in perspective is not the same as being casual or haphazard in your approach to training and racing . It is simply **not becoming too intense, becoming so uptight that you cannot function optimally.**

Anxiety is closely related to fear – and fear is a very real factor in competitive sport . In his 1982 model of the Ideal Performance State , James Loehr says “ Fear is an emotion that we attach to a certain situation based purely on our perception of that situation or of past experience of that situation. We need to alter the mind set to overcome this fear”. Like Susan Jeffries ( “Feel the fear and do it anyway”) , Loehr gives a number of tips for coping with or overcoming this fear: (a) **Embrace the fear . N**ever try to avoid what it is you fear. You must face it. Running away from fear only prolongs having to deal with the issue and can further heighten the fear. Our emotional states have a very large bearing on our bodies’ performance levels. Loehr recommends that we take the general fear and break it down and “unpack it” . If we break it up into parts we will probably find that it is not so terrifying. Very often the fear of an upcoming event can be worse than the actual event itself . Tim Noakes reminds us that “ The conscious brain attempts to prevent a maximum effort ,even before competition . This is the same as the conscious brain attempting to interfere with your performance when you tire two-thirds of the way into a race “. In the article on “Racing”, I already described how Niall Bruton’s training performance always plummeted immediately before a major championship. It was Laro Byrne ( again ) who reassured me on this point telling me that it was simply Niall’s mind “shutting down his body” in order to save it for the supreme effort in the race.

(b) **Change the perception of failure. “**There is no such a thing as failure – only feedback”. (This is similar to Jurgen Klopp’s saying “ it is how you react to defeat that is most important.” ) There can be small successes in all our “failures”. If a “failed event” helps us how NOT to perform or helps us to identify areas that need work , then that is a small “victory”. Athletes who are able to pick positive elements from negative experiences are the ones who will advance and become mentally tough . ( Eamonn Coghlan always claimed that he was able to “turn negatives into positives” ).To quote Vince Lombardi again “ It’s not whether you get knocked down : it’s whether you get up”. ( c ) R**ecreate the “failed experience”:** For instance , if you are “race shy” you must race more frequently in order to overcome the fear. We must expose ourselves to exact replicas of the event that caused the anxiety.

(d) **Just Breathe !**

Why ? Is this too simplistic a remedy ? In 1921 Otto Loewi, a German physiologist ,discovered that by stimulating the vagus nerve one could reduce one’s heart rate. “Vagus” is the Latin for “wandering” and the vagus nerve is known as “the wanderer nerve” due to the extensive branch system diverging from two thick stems located in the cerebellum that wander to the lowest viscera of your abdomen , touching your heart and most major organs along the way . This nerve constantly reports sensory information concerning the state of the body to the brain . ( The next time you hear somebody say “ trust your gut “or “follow your gut instinct” , you will know that this really means ” trust your vagus nerve “ ! ) .The key to stimulating the vagus nerve is deep, diaphragmatic breathing ( also known as “belly breathing” ) .When you breathe in , your tummy should expand ; when you breathe out ,your tummy should deflate . ( Breathe In – Tummy Out/ Breathe Out -Tummy In ) . When you do this ,you release a substance called acetylcholine which , in essence , is a tranquiliser.

**(e) Concentrate on the process, not the outcome.**

There is a story told ( apocryphal perhaps ) of a young Formula 1 driver who, unexpectedly, finds himself in the lead after all the favourites have crashed out . There are only three laps to go , he has a commanding lead over the second placed competitor and all he has to do is hold things steady . He begins to think about what this impending victory will do for his career : apart from the champagne reception and the adulation of the model girls , he knows that this win will make a very positive impact on his financial situation . He starts dreaming of new improved contracts , appearance fees , lucrative endorsements……And then he crashes and the day dream is over .

Once again ,in his biography , the refreshingly honest Robert Heffernan tells us a somewhat similar story at his own expense. In the World Championships in Helsinki in 2005 , he was lying in 12th.place with just a couple of kms.to go . He knew that if he finished in the top twelve , his Sports Council grant would be increased to €20,000 for the next year. This would clear all of his debts and leave him with approx.€11,000 ,enough to live on and finance a few trips to warm weather and altitude training. But then his reverie was rudely interrupted . Let’s listen to Robert himself : “ 500 metres later I was disqualified and had lost it all .**I had been completely distracted by the thoughts of finally being able to clear my debts instead of focusing on my technique”.**

So, try to saturate yourself in and enjoy the immediate moment . There is a poignant scene in the final series of the  ***West Wing*** when the Presidential candidate and his campaign manager are waiting for the election results to come in from the very last State . They have no idea how it is going to go , indeed they are not too optimistic . They talk about all the hard work that has gone into a long , bruising campaign and the campaign manager wonders will it be all for naught . The candidate looks at him and says “Well, this may be end , but-even if it is- it’s been a hell of a ride” . He knows that win or lose , he will look back with pleasure on a phase in his life which has taught him a lot and has enriched his life in many ways . ( I imagine most people know that he did actually win ! ) The core of this advice is the same as what many philosophers have said down through the ages : the journey is more important than the destination .So focus on the small steps , the everyday mini-goals . Get the training right and the racing results should follow- with all the resultant benefits.

**(f) Control arousal :**

This means that you do not allow yourself to be upset by events that occur before competition . This is easier said than done ; after all, athletes are not automatons ,they have emotions and feelings like every other human being. But it is essential to learn how to control the flow of adrenaline before competition . I already discussed this in a previous article stating that coaches who give inspirational speeches the night before a big event are actually making a mistake as they are making the athletes aroused and nervous far too soon . As a result the athletes may find it very hard to sleep as the hormone epinephrine is coursing through their bodies making them edgy and ready for “fight or flight” . Champions are usually able to control the release of adrenaline until the last possible moment . When he arrived at a competition , Jim Ryun was able to go to sleep for an hour or so until it was time for him to start his warm up !

**5. Relaxation.** Athletes must be able to relax. Runners who get too “uptight”before competition will inevitably fail to do themselves justice . Controlling nerves has already been discussed in a previous article. Some of the points raised in this article also indicate how to relax e.g. keeping things in perspective .( Rory McIlroy remembering what he had seen in Haiti ) . As Christy Brady often told us before a race “Your manhoods are not at stake lads – relax !”. Christy often used humour to relax athletes who were getting too tense and nervous before a big race . ( Joe Cooper does the same ). John O’Sullivan reminding the Press and ,indeed, the entire Irish nation that “nobody died out there” after Sonia’s disappointing performance in Atlana. Athletes regularly listen to music before a race to relax and to cut themselves off “from the madding crowd”. Some psychologists insist that a good page turner of a book is the best thing for an athlete to have and read before an important competition. Other strategies would include :

**Visualisation :** This was discussed already in the article on Racing . A recent finding would suggest that thinking about a specific task produces the same brain activity that occurs when the actual task is being performed. It is not clear whether visualisation needs to be learned or whether it is an intuitive activity .Most psychologists say that it does require a lot of practice in order to obtain maximum benefit from it. It is interesting that Roger Bannister engaged in a form of informal visualisation over sixty years ago . In his biography he states “ Every night for a week before the race there came a moment when I saw myself at the start line . My whole body would grow nervous and tremble . I ran the race over in my mind . **Then I would calm myself and go to sleep.”** He also visualised how he would beat Landy in the Empire Games ( now the Commonwealth Games ) in 1954. He would imagine how he would restrain himself for most of the race ,harbouring his energy for one supreme moment when he would unleash a withering kick : “ I must reserve my effort of willpower for the moment when I would fling myself past him near the finish . Until then I would be entirely passive , thinking of nothing else throughout the whole race” .

( Young athletes, in particular, can learn a lot from this : Make just ONE BIG MOVE; don’t be dissipating your energy by making several moves ( or responding to every move ) during the course of the race ) .

**Brent Russell, P**rofessor of Exercise and Nutritional Sciences at San Diego State University believes that visualisation is absolutely essential and claims that the majority of successful athletes employ it as part of their competitive strategies. It can help athletes with their concentration and focus ; it can also help them to expect the unexpected .It can help to concentrate on technique even when tired and to handle pressure in the closing stages of a race .

**Not afraid to lose :** While winners hate to lose , paradoxically they are also not afraid to lose ! Ruby Walsh ,talking about his friend and rival A.P.McCoy ( Champion jockey 20 years in a row ), said “A.P’s win rate was 3 in 7 ; this gave him an unbelievable number of winners but still , when you think about it , it means that he lost 7 for every 3 that he won. And that’s just the way it is : you always lose more than you win”.

We often hear coaches asking “How badly do you need it ?” and managers may say after a match is over “We wanted it more than they did” or “ They were hungrier than we were”. While these comments correctly indicate that a competitor really needs to want to win , needs to be hungry to win, nevertheless, there is such a thing as wanting it too much. Competitors can put an intolerable strain on themselves by wanting victory so much that it becomes a life-and-death issue for them . This ,almost inevitably, leads to such a competitor “freezing” on the big occasion , becoming so uptight that he doesn’t do himself justice. Liam Hayes ,former Meath footballer and journalist , wrote a very interesting piece after the third replay between Dublin and Meath in the Leinster final of 1991. ( it took four games to separate them ! ) .Hayes describes how he felt when they were 6 points down with just 7 minutes to go : “ Suddenly, I actually felt relief; it was finally going to end. I was convinced that Dublin had it . With this realisation , I felt a weight fall off my shoulders . O.K, we were going to lose but the sky wasn’t going to fall. All that remained was for us to keep playing to the end , not to throw in the towel ,not to be seen to capitulate. And the funny thing was , the rest of the lads must have felt the same because, suddenly, free from the tension and the fear of losing , we started to play .” That is the key phrase : **“ free from the tension and fear of losing, we started to play”.**

The rest is history. The teams exchanged points then, with 5 minutes left, Meath got a goal . Dublin seemed unperturbed .Too little too late was the belief of the pundits. Just as the clock touched full-time, Meath found the net again . And then ,almost unbelievably, in injury time they snatched the winning point : 2-10 to 0-15 . But from a psychological perspective, the really interesting point is that it was only when Hayes and his team mates relaxed and became less up-tight that they were really able to play . That is when they entered what many competitors describe as “the zone”; that is the ideal mental state where a competitor concentrates simply on the process of playing without any thought of the outcome.

Athletes ,and sports people in general, should not “get too far of themselves”: they should focus on the everyday tasks which will lead to improvement ( the different forms of training which their coach prescribes ), they should as Hager says “ Live the process, love the process and believe in the process”.

Remember that “Fear” is not the same as “Nerves”. Nerves keep you sharp, keep you alert . Fear ,on the other hand, is debilitating , it manifests reluctance and leaves us questioning our ability to perform well. Runners sometimes clutter their minds going into a race with too many extraneous details such as split times ,qualifying standards, their rivals’ reputations, etc., etc. If they simply concentrated on racing ,on trying to win or at least beat as many of their competitors as possible , they might find the whole process less complicated and they just might be much more successful !

If we are honest it must be admitted that winners are , and have to be , selfish . While watching **Being A.P.,** the recent film about A.P.McCoy , many viewers were surprised and possibly even shocked by one exchange between A.P. and his wife . The latter wanted to go on a holiday but A.P. didn’t want to take any time off as it might allow his rivals to catch up . She said “But I’ve been working hard too : it’s not all about you ,you know” . “ Since when ?” was his curt reply . I think that one phrase gives us an insight into the self-absorbed mentality of a winner . McCoy admitted that he was addicted to winning “like a heroin addict chasing the next fix”. He went on to say “The more you win, the more you want to win and t becomes greed. **But you have to be that way.”**

Finally , a winner is one who never gives up . We are all familiar I imagine with the old saying **“A quitter never wins and a winner never quits.” W**e saw this very recently in the almost unbelievable comeback which Barcelona made against PSG in the Champions’ League . Some of us saw it many years ago in the Munich Olympic 5000 when Ian Stewart came from fifth to third to pip Prefontaine for the Bronze in the final strides.

Another old saying is “**Sooner or later , the man who wins is the man who thinks he can”.**

**If you think you are beaten ………you are . If you think you dare not …….you don’t. Success begins with your own will. It’s all in your state of mind. Life’s battles are not always won by those who are stronger and faster: Sooner or later , the person who wins is the person WHO THINKS HE CAN.**