Push through the pain. You've only got 2,000 meters left. Less than eight minutes to go! You're already more than two-thirds of the way through! Keep going!"

What keeps the body going through the piece? When the legs are screaming at the rower to stop and he is so completely focused that everything around is muffled in a vague haze — how does he keep going? How does the rower get the subconscious mind and body to work together without consulting the conscious and rational mind which would surely prevent him from continuing?

It is a question to which the entire field of sport psychology is devoted. Its purpose is to help the athlete push beyond limitations imposed by the rational mind. One area of sport psychology is based upon a simple premise: a change in an athlete's mental state is consciously or unconsciously accompanied by a change in his physical state. In simplest terms: when muscle tension occurs as a result of anxiety or worry, it interferes with performance because many of the nerves needed for the coordinated movement messages are taken up with the worry messages. Thus, the more tension in the body, the more difficult it is to perform the coordinated actions.

When an athlete gets nervous about an upcoming performance, there are accompanying physiological and psychological behavioral responses. In rowing, a seat race, an ergometer test, or an important race are all examples of potential anxiety-producing situations. Reactions to anxiety may be positive or negative. With the positive reaction — called the "fight reaction" — the person is excited about the test and thrives on the challenge.

"I love to race," said John Pescatore, stroke of the 1988 bronze-medal Olympic men's eight. "I absolutely love the feeling of being at the starting line — there's nothing like it. I always think it's funny when I look around and other guys are sliding back and forth, breathing deeply, and turning different colors. I say to myself, 'I just don't understand why these guys are feeling like this. We've all worked so hard to get here — this is what we've been waiting for. We're finally here at the line of the World Championships, and these guys are scared out of their minds. It's silly. I couldn't imagine being anywhere else! I don't race with fear. I race with excitement. I think that is what has helped me prepare to race.'"

Not everyone is so lucky. Most people experience a negative reaction — called the "flight reaction." Athletes who get very nervous before a race and begin to focus on the negative aspects of the upcoming performance are experiencing the flight reaction. They tell themselves that they don't row well in a crosswind, that the rigging is wrong, or that they look bad. In short, they are looking for an excuse for a potential poor performance and thus, in effect, preparing themselves for one.

"I had a rower in Italy who had stomach cramps before every race," said National Technical Director Kris Korzeniowski. "There was really no physiological basis for the cramps, but whenever he thought about them, it was as if he were inviting them and they showed up."

It's important to remember that these reactions have no physiological basis; they are just the result of an anxious subconscious. The person is simply experiencing a typical negative reaction. It is essential that he/she recognize this fact and learn to con-
trol this mental state to avoid causing a detriment to the upcoming performance.

To help with these mind-over-matter situations, sport psychologists suggest using a technique called self-talk. When an athlete is faced with a grueling test of physical strength, such as a 6,000 meter ergometer piece, most find it a challenge to make it through.

The rower is about 2,000 meters into the piece and a little voice inside his head is telling him. “Hey, ease off a little, this is starting to hurt. You've got a long way to go. You better conserve a little energy.”

The rower pushes through another 2,000 meters.

Now that little voice has started screaming. An internal battle begins between the little voice and another voice which is fighting hard for a seat in the boat.

“Stop!” cries the little voice. “Your legs are on fire! You'll never make it through.”

Meanwhile, the other voice is urging the rower, “Ignore the pain! If it hurts - row harder! You've worked too hard to give up now! You're more than halfway through with the piece! Keep going!”

It is important for the rower to become aware of what he says to himself during both the successful performances and the unsuccessful ones. During unsuccessful performances, most athletes find that they have programmed failure through self-doubt and negative statements. In other words, the little voice wins out. Obviously, future performance would be enhanced if the rowers could eliminate these self-defeating thoughts that lead to worry and decreased levels of performance, and replace them with more positive ones. Two common ways of doing this are through the use of countering and thought stopping.

Athletes use the countering technique to argue against the little voice telling them “You can’t do it.” They refute everything the voice says and convince themselves that they can do it. “At most of my races, at least in the past year, when I’ve reached the point that I really start to feel like I can't go on, it has been when I’ve started to notice that I'm moving on other people,” said 1988 world champion women’s lightweight sculler Kris Karlson. “I say to myself ‘Wow! They're dying more than I am.’ I get past them and start getting psyched because I say to myself, ‘This is great! I'm really moving! I can hang on for a few more strokes!’ Then I manage to block out how dead I am and start to focus on the fact that I'm going to win the World Championships.”

Another way of dealing with negative thoughts is through thought stopping. This technique entails focusing briefly on the negative thoughts and then using a trigger to interrupt the negative thought pattern. The trigger can be as simple as the word “stop” or an action such as shaking the head. What matters is that the trigger be a natural one and that it be used consistently.

Athletes usually find it helpful to combine thought stopping with imaging. They imagine themselves in the situation where the negative thought occurred and practice interrupting the thoughts with the trigger. They practice doing this over and over again until the negative talk and corresponding feelings of anxiety are stopped. These techniques are helpful for overcoming the negative thoughts associated with anxiety which could result in a detriment to performance.

Still, a little bit of nervousness before an event is to be expected; it’s healthy — as long as it is controlled. Each athlete has his or her own way of preparing for a race, of controlling that nervousness.

“I've had some athletes who, on race day, like to keep going through life like nothing is happening,” said National Team Coach Curtis Jordan. “They’ll watch the races, bounce around talking to all of their friends and really try not to get too wound up. They have a certain attitude that says, ‘Hey, I know what I can do, and when I get on the water, I’ll be warmed up and ready to do it — no problem. Another guy might go into the locker room or off into a closet — literally into a closet — put on his headset and listen to his Walkman for three hours. He doesn’t want to see any other races or hear them called. He just wants to do whatever he has to do in his own mind to get himself prepared and not have any outside stimulus.”

“During the dead time before a race, I just try to relax,” said Kris Karlson. “Sometimes I’ll sit by myself, and other times I'll find someone and talk about something totally unrelated to rowing. I'm one of those people who avoids thinking about the race. I find that it gets me too nervous, too early.”

John Pescatore uses race visualization to prepare for his races. “The night before a race, I go through the entire thing five or six times. I visualize every single stroke and count them in my mind. I have a mental picture in which I see the race from different angles. I see all six crews, sometimes from my own seat, and sometimes like a television camera — with top and side views. It's almost like I'm halfway into a dream. Each time I do it, it happens faster, almost like we took the rating a beat higher. And, most of the time, I visualize us winning.”

Some crews work as a team to reduce anxiety and prepare for the race. “Prior to races, in cases where people are all over the campus and have to come down to the boathouse at different times, it is important to me that when they come to the boathouse, each person's mind is set on what they want to do. I don't want them to be worried about their boatmates and where their minds are,” said Curtis Jordan.
“So each boat meets on campus and discusses the race a little bit. Then the coxswain calls the race — from the moment she pushes off the dock to the time they cross the finish line. The rowers listen and visualize the whole race in their minds. Then they come down to the boathouse together and everyone is tuned in to one another.”

It is important to keep in mind that this pre-race strategy is only useful as one part of an overall mental training program. Rowers can’t just sit down the day before a race to imagine and expect to be mentally prepared.

Steve Gladstone, Head Men’s Coach at Brown, is quick to point out that the pre-race imaging should not be overemphasized. “The mental rehearsal is just the frosting on the cake. It calms people down a bit because it helps them organize the race in their minds,” he explained. “This sort of mental rehearsal has some value, but not overwhelming amounts.”

Korzeniowski, who still practices mental rehearsal, said, “I believe that it can be very helpful in certain situations; to control anxiety, relax and reduce negative arousal — the flight response. This applies to all levels of rowing. We see people who just hate the ergometer, for example. They are very good rowers — they win seat races, and win races. But the moment they sit down on the erg and look at the counter — when they have to perform by themselves and be measured — they are paralyzed. They never score. And we have others who can go through the erg, and the seat races, but when it comes to an important race, they catch a crab, or make another mistake because they put so much into this race that they choke. Sport psychology can make the rowers aware of these situations and how to control them; it can help rowers at all levels.”

Korzeniowski has proposed a plan to start educating the rowers in the camps with sport psychology seminars. The first major problem he wants to attack is anxiety control, followed by motivation, and goal-setting. He plans to gear the mental training more toward pre-race preparation than the actual race itself.

“Racing itself is probably easier for people than all of the preparation for that race,” he said. “I found guys before the Olympics Games just feeling anxious to go to the races, they just wanted to get it over with. Going to the workouts twice per day, every day, and going through the long summer where everyone else is having fun, takes a certain kind of person; you have to be a sort of masochist, really.”

In this sport no one can be applauded for a perfect score. There are only eight parts, and everyone is just a face from far away. And then there are the lonely workouts on the river in the cold and rain, where again no one sees you. No one applauds you. Sometimes the coach will say “good job,” but you can’t even count on that most of the time.

“The preparation places more of a mental load on people than the race itself,” said Korzeniowski. “And I think that we’re going to have to gear more of our mental training efforts toward that.”

Because the sport is so demanding, it is crucial that the rower himself be the one who desires the success. And he must keep this fact in mind throughout his training.

“People really have to want it,” stressed Steve Gladstone. “As a coach, it is my job to remind them that this is what you want, and I’m here to help you get there.”

Thus, to row successfully and reach his potential, the rower pushes through the limitations imposed by the rational mind. Control over mind and body allows the athlete to reach beyond what was previously believed capable. And that may be the reason why rowing is so addictive for its victims.

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