

Mental Imagery for Running

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While running a long hill at the end of my regular workout course the other evening I felt unusually fatigued. Rather than back off on my pace, I simply shut my eyes and allowed my mind to become blank for a moment, just focusing my attention on my breathing. I then pictured a large hand on my seat pushing me up the hill. As the image became more vivid, I could feel the fatigue giving way to feelings of looseness and smooth movement. Upon reaching the crest of the hill, I was surprised to find that my pace had actually picked up (unconsciously) rather than dropped off.

I share this recent episode with you to illustrate a method by which runners can tap their “reserve” by means of mental control. There is increasing scientific evidence in the field of sport psychology that unconscious control of motor movements involved in a sports event is more efficient than conscious control. This finding has been particularly helpful in golf and tennis where people tend to rely too heavily on conscious “commands” to themselves and not enough to their “programmed” unconscious reactions.

However, as a runner I am aware of times when I have also “commanded” myself to make particular split time or maintain a given pace. On those occasions I experienced the feeling of “working” at the task and a corresponding sense of division in which part of me became the taskmaster and the other the servant. By employing mental imagery, this sense of the self-divided is instead replaced with a feeling of mind-body integration (or what is commonly called a sense of Flow).

Using mental imagery is really a way of letting the mind tell the body what to do (or what not to do) in its own way and in doing so allow for the full potential of both the mind and body to be utilized. If you are a person who runs for the exercise benefits (cardio-vascular fitness or weight control) but do not enjoy running, then mental imagery can assist you in dealing with factors such as fatigue and boredom in a more pleasant manner.

The episode I reported at the outset is an excellent example of the kind of imagery that could make things feel less uncomfortable. Another technique that is useful in this regard is dis-association, that is having your mind focus on something else other than running, preferably a pleasant or stimulating activity.

Mental imagery is a way to both increase your pleasure and enhance your performance while running. It can be used by everyone at almost any time and so the variations of its application are infinite. For the elite runner, it forms the basis for even more advanced mental preparation.