

From the Field: Mental Strength

"Whether on RAAM or a double-century ride, our mental state is often what determines whether we finish the ride successfully or pack it in early"

by Bernie Comeau

Bernie Comeau, a veteran of RAAM and Furnace Creek, edits "From the Field"- a series of articles on what accomplished RAAM racers (the elite of the ultra community) do and use in order to be successful.

Mental training techniques

In the 2000 Race Across America I had the privilege to be a crew member for Fabio Biasiolo. Fabio is a great rider, who had a great race this year, finishing third, behind Wolfgang Fasching and Danny Chew. This was also Fabio's third consecutive top-5 finish at RAAM, proving himself to be among the best RAAM riders of recent years. As Fabio made his way across the country, I was able to witness first-hand what it takes to be a top RAAM rider.

Two things in particular impressed me as we followed Fabio throughout the race: his physical strength, and his mental strength. Regardless of the weather, terrain, or how many hours he was in the saddle, Fabio was able to maintain a relatively high speed while on the bike. His time splits from time station to time station were consistently among the best throughout the race. Clearly, this accounted for his third place finish. But what allowed Fabio to maintain this consistency of speed day after day for nine days was his incredible mental focus and concentration. Regardless of the race conditions, his physical condition, or his position in the race, Fabio was able to keep himself focused on the task at hand: riding his bike as fast as he could across the country. As the race wore on, Fabio was clearly tired and physically uncomfortable, but he never let this deter him. While others might have found legitimate excuses for taking breaks off the bike, Fabio was able to differentiate between an excuse for stopping, and a reason for stopping. He simply refused to let himself get off of the bike unless it was absolutely necessary. This was typical of Fabio's entire RAAM. He remained focused and in control (and on the bike) throughout the race, regardless of how tired and sore he was.

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This, I came to realize, is one of the chief differences between accomplished RAAM riders (like Fabio) who are consistently at the front of the race, and those riders (like myself) who have viewed RAAM from the rear of the pack. To be able to perform so well under such trying circumstances requires not only physical stamina, but immense mental strength.

From our own experiences, we've all become well aware of the important role that mental strength plays in ultra cycling. Whether on RAAM or a double-century ride, our mental state is often what determines whether we finish the ride successfully or pack it in early. As Fabio has told me, "If your physical condition is still good but your mind is not, you will give up for sure".

But while everyone recognizes the importance of the mental aspect of riding, few of us seem to do much to enhance this vital part of our performance. Indeed, many riders feel that the mental tenacity required to perform well at ultra races is something that is innate to one's personality. Either you are blessed with such attributes, or you are not. This, however, is not the case. Just as we can train ourselves to be better physical athletes, we can also train ourselves to be better mental athletes. Research in the fields of personality and cognitive psychology, as well as sports psychology, has led to a better appreciation of what exactly can be done to enhance one's mental strength for the purpose of athletic competition. And coupling such general research data with what accomplished RAAM riders are telling us can go a long way in helping us to develop effective strategies for enhancing our own mental strength for ultra cycling.

Joan Steidinger, a sports psychologist who writes for UltraRunning magazine, has noted that what we might generally refer to as mental strength can be divided into five identifiable, but inter-related components. These are: 1) thought patterns; 2) motivation; 3) focus; 4) visualization; and 5) confidence. Applying this model to what accomplished RAAM riders say about their experiences may help us to understand better the mental side of ultra cycling.

Thought Patterns

Thought patterns, or cognitions, have to do with the ways in which we think about things. We do not all think about things, or approach events, in the same way. Two people, presented with the same situation, may respond in very different ways, based upon their different cognitions or thought patterns. As a graduate student in psychology a few years back, for example, my research was in the field of hypnosis. One of the things we examined was people's perceptions of pain. What we found (simply put) was that two people, given a pain stimulus of the same magnitude, would report feeling different degrees of pain. While one person might report the pain to be almost nonexistent, the other would report a great deal of pain. Further study revealed that the way a person thought about the event correlated highly with their reports of pain. Those who tended to see the experiment in a calm or positive manner (e.g., as a learning experience) reported little pain, while those whose cognitions were more exaggerated or negative (e.g., "it's going to hurt!") reported a great deal of pain for the same stimulus. This latter

behaviour was labeled "catastrophizing"; when seemingly inconsequential events are regarded essentially as catastrophes by the person.

The general conclusion we drew from these (and other) studies was that one's perception of an event is largely determined by one's cognitions, regardless of how "standard" the situation may appear. In this regard, cognitions have a profound effect on our general state of mind. Whether we view the proverbial glass of water as half-empty or half-full will go a long way to determining how we behave in a given situation.

Similarly, we get in trouble in ultra races when our cognitions are overrun with catastrophizing. When people DNF, it's not usually because they cannot physically continue on the bike. More often, it's because they have mentally made the remaining task (finishing the race) out to be too much to handle given the present circumstances. To echo Fabio's words noted above, if the mind is not good, you will give up for sure.

The key to successful ultra cycling, then, is how we deal with the bad times that we are inevitably going to encounter. Successful RAAM riders are well aware of this, and prepare themselves accordingly. As one rider noted, "I don't train for the good days; I train for the bad days".

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All of the successful RAAM riders who responded to the poll clearly recognized the benefit of calm, positive cognitions over negative ones during a race. They were all individuals who employed the "glass is half-full" mentality as much as possible, in an attempt to minimize catastrophizing during low points in a race. Remaining calm and philosophical during bad times seemed to be the key to their success. As one rider explained, "I just think that low points during the race are part of the race too, so I know they will fly away soon". Another rider echoed these sentiments, stating that, "Things change every hour in RAAM. So after a low point there will surely be a high point at any time. So just wait... and keep pedaling".

The most effective way that these riders minimized catastrophizing during bad times, then, was to remain as calm and relaxed as possible. As one rider noted, "being relaxed helps me to get through the low points; I can [then] use my mind the way I need it for RAAM".

Though no specific relaxation techniques were mentioned by any of the riders, one can easily imagine that formal training in techniques such as meditation, yoga, or guided imagery would also be an effective strategy to help keep the mind relaxed and positive in times of stress. Indeed, critical research has indicated that when such techniques are practiced over a long-term period, it

becomes more habitual for one's cognitions to be calm, relaxed, and positive. This, then, could be a powerful tool for ultra cycling, since in times of stress it is one's habitualized thought patterns that surface first.

Most riders also used music to help to keep their thoughts and moods as positive and upbeat as possible. Many noted that music was "a good distraction" to help get them through low points. As one rider pointed out, "how can I feel sorry for myself with Bob Marley blaring through the loudspeakers at 2 in the morning!".

Accomplished RAAM riders are well aware of the connection between their cognitions and their general state of mind. Regardless of the specific method, each employed strategies which minimized negative thoughts as much as possible while simultaneously producing calm and positive thoughts. This was exemplified no better than by the rider who explained, "I also think about the bad experiences I had in my life as well as people who were bad with me. They would be happy if I did poorly so that motivates me to ride better. I try to transform those bad experiences into positive ones". As Steidinger noted in her article, "finding ways to frame your thoughts in a positive manner provides an invaluable tool to begin to build your mental skills".

Motivation

Directly related to thought patterns is motivation. We are motivated to perform an activity (and perform it well) when we have a sense of purpose as to why we are doing what we are doing. This sense of purpose is derived by setting goals for ourselves. These goals can be as simple and general as "I want to see how well I can do", or as specific and lofty as "I want to place first". Whatever they may be, it is important to keep in mind that the goals we set for ourselves will go a long way in determining whether we view what we are doing as a success or a failure. When we define our goals, we are de facto defining what we consider to be a success and what we consider to be a failure. In this regard, goals are a double-edged sword: they can provide us with the motivation to keep moving toward success, or they can stop us in our tracks by reminding us that we have failed. As such, the goals that we set for ourselves will directly influence our cognitions and state of mind at any given point in an event.

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Given this connection between goals and cognitions, it is vitally important that the goals we set for ourselves be both realistic and attainable. There is nothing more demoralizing than to be in the middle of a race with the realization that you are not going to meet your goals. In such situations, thoughts quickly are encompassed with a sense of failure, and it is only a short time from there before you inevitably become a DNF.

The solution, then, is to set goals that keep you motivated to stay on the bike and in the race. The optimal goals for maintaining a high level of motivation are those that are neither too easy nor too difficult for you to achieve. If a goal is too easily achievable, the sense of accomplishment that comes from completing the task will not be there, and your motivation will suffer. Similarly, if the goal is so difficult that it is (or becomes) unattainable, you will also lose motivation. The key to setting reasonable and attainable goals is to be honest with yourself with respect to your abilities (past performances, recent training, etc.), and determine your goals accordingly. Indeed, if your goals are correctly set within these parameters, you can actually use your goals to help maintain a high level of motivation throughout an event. And maintaining a high level of motivation means that your resultant cognitions will typically be framed in a more positive manner. In this way, your thought patterns and motivation will feed off of each other to help you to achieve your best results.

These are the practices clearly employed by accomplished RAAM riders. All of them spoke of going into their races with specific goals in mind, and using those goals to keep themselves motivated throughout the event. Indeed, the importance of goal-setting was not lost on these riders. As one of them noted, "in my opinion, the most important mental attributes for RAAM riders are great concentration and a strong feeling of your goal". Correspondingly, this rider considered "my determination and strength in reaching my goal" as his best attribute for being a successful RAAM rider.

With respect to specific goals, many of these riders had a hierarchy of end-result goals in mind before they started the race, such as, in the words of one rider, "to finish, to be in the top 5, to finish in under 9 days, and to win". Significantly, many of these accomplished RAAM riders focused primarily on the least ambitious of their goals ("merely" to finish RAAM), even though they had all done very well in the race previously. As one rider explained, "the race is so difficult, and the other riders are so strong, I cannot think about winning as my goal. Sure, I want to win, but I must first concentrate on riding the race in order to finish, and riding my own race. That is what is most important. Then, if I do this, I know that I will do well in the race". The most important consideration for them, then, was to have a clearly attainable goal in mind, which was often the most attainable of their set of goals. The consensus among them was that too many riders make the mistake of focusing on the top goal in their hierarchy of goals. Then, should this top goal become unattainable at some point, the other (lesser) goals will seem insignificant in comparison. The corresponding result will be that you lose motivation, and a DNF often follows. But with a bottom-up approach, you are more likely to keep your motivation level high throughout the race, since you are moving up through your goals, and each one becomes more significant than the last. In this way, your attitude, and subsequent thought patterns, are always more positive.

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A number of accomplished RAAM riders also found it helpful to dissect the race into smaller, incremental goals (e.g., time stations, state lines) that could be achieved along the way. They found this strategy especially helpful for major events such as RAAM, where so many hours are spent on the bike before the finish line is reached that it is difficult to focus continuously on the end-result goal. Smaller, incremental goals along the way not only helped them to gauge their progress, but also helped to keep their motivation level high throughout the race.

Focus

Clearly related to motivation, focus refers to the ability to concentrate on a task to the exclusion of everything else around us. When we are fully absorbed in what we are doing, external stimuli that might otherwise be distractions seem to melt away. We've all experienced those moments on the bike when everything seems to be just right; we're in a "zone", completely absorbed in riding the bike, and performing to the best of our physical abilities. We seem invincible, and nothing can stand in our way. This is the ultimate in focus and concentration.

The aim, of course, is to maintain such conditions of ultimate focus and concentration for as long as possible. As one accomplished RAAM rider has noted, "to have a clear mind during the race is very important". The problem, though, is that these moments of being "in the zone" often come and go with little advance warning.

Accomplished RAAM riders recognize this, and employ techniques designed to help them initiate and maintain such conditions of complete mental focus. Music was by far the most commonly employed of these techniques. Indeed, all accomplished RAAM riders noted that they relied on music, not only to keep them positive and upbeat, but to help them to maintain their focus and concentration. As one rider explained, "music keeps me focused because it helps to keep my mind from wandering, especially at night. When I can't see where I'm going I tend to get very bored, and my mind starts to wander. Music helps to keep my mind focused on riding the bike. Otherwise, I start to think about things (like pain and exhaustion) too much". Similarly, another rider noted that "music helps me because it can give me the pace I need when my mind and body can't do that very well". Clearly, music has become a great tool for RAAM riders to help them to maintain their focus and concentration.

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Though not mentioned specifically by RAAM riders, additional techniques that could aid one in maintaining focus, concentration, and a clear mind include

those mentioned previously in the discussion of thought patterns. Indeed, mental disciplines such as meditation and yoga, as well as other techniques such as guided imagery and breathing exercises, have as their goal not only a quieting of the mind, but also an increase in pointed concentration and focus. Such techniques would seem natural as aids to maintain clarity of mind, focus, and concentration while riding. Though evidently not in use among most accomplished RAAM riders, they are certainly employed liberally among professional and amateur athletes in other sports.

Not surprisingly, accomplished RAAM riders noted that what also helps to keep their minds focused is a clear sense of their goals. Many reported that when they are mindful of their specific goals, this helps them better to concentrate and to focus on riding the bike.

As with the symbiotic relationship between cognitions and motivation, focus and motivation feed off of each other. When you have a clear sense of your goals, and you are highly motivated to achieve them, it is much easier to maintain focus and concentration. Likewise, when your focus and concentration are good, it is much easier to stay motivated to achieve your goals. To quote again the RAAM rider acknowledged above, "the most important mental attributes for RAAM riders are great concentration and a strong feeling of your goal".

Visualization

Visualization refers to the practice of creating specified images in our minds. Once created, and if attended to sufficiently, such images can have a profound effect on our cognitions, as well as on our focus and concentration, and even on our physiological systems. If there's one thing I've learned in my years of research and teaching in cognitive psychology and hypnosis, it's that mental imagery is a very powerful tool.

In recent years, many athletes, both amateur and professional, have begun to employ guided imagery and visualization as means to help enhance their performances. The chief benefits that they report include an increase in the ability to focus and concentrate, a sense of being better prepared mentally for the various situations that arise during competition, and a better overall sense of their fears, anxieties, strengths, and weaknesses with respect to themselves and their events.

Though few accomplished RAAM riders appear to be using specific visualization or guided imagery techniques, most of these riders were employing free-form visualization in some way. Many riders, for example, spoke of envisioning the course over and over well before the race, in an attempt to ascertain at what points specific things needed to be done, or where they could expect their strengths and weaknesses to emerge. Others spoke of using their training rides to imagine that they were doing RAAM. On these rides, they would often imagine themselves climbing the most difficult mountain of RAAM, or riding through the endless flat stretches of the plains.

These imagined scenarios are more than simple fantasy. They can be used quite effectively for problem solving, and perhaps more importantly as "practice runs", which can ultimately help you to cope better with actual situations when they arise during the race. Though nothing can perfectly simulate the extreme conditions of actually doing RAAM, such techniques can serve as effective training tools, which may ultimately help your concentration, focus, and frame of mind during the race.

Confidence

Confidence refers to the belief in one's ability to perform successfully. If we determine success by whether we have attained our goals (as outlined in the motivation discussion), then we can more specifically say that confidence is the belief in our ability to achieve our goals successfully. As such, our confidence is determined largely by the goals that we set for ourselves. If our goals are realistic and attainable, our confidence level will be relatively high. If our goals are unrealistic and largely unattainable, or we are not so sure of our abilities, our confidence will suffer.

Confidence is an important component to consider here because it has a direct influence on our cognitions and thought patterns. If we are confident in our abilities to achieve our goals, then we are going to be much more calm and relaxed, and have a much more positive attitude than if we lack confidence.

Accomplished RAAM riders are very much aware of this, and set their goals accordingly. As we observed with the discussion of motivation above, successful RAAM riders focus their attention primarily on the most attainable of their stated goals. All of these riders have demonstrated their ability to complete RAAM very successfully, yet most continue to view completion of the race as their initial goal each year. As with motivation, the benefit of this bottom-up approach is that as each goal on their list is accomplished, and they move on to the next goal, their overall confidence in their performance increases.

This is an important element of confidence. We must endeavour not only to have confidence at the beginning of a race, but throughout the entire event. We can all exhibit confidence at the start line. But these are long races, and once it becomes apparent that you may not achieve your primary goal, confidence in your performance will inevitably drop. The result is a concomitant drop in motivation, commonly followed by a deluge of negative thought patterns (and probably a DNF).

Confidence is important, then, because it is so closely related to both motivation and thought patterns. Our confidence is determined largely by the goals that we set for ourselves, and this resultant level of confidence will in turn influence our cognitions and thought patterns during a race. When we truly know that our goals are within reach and attainable, we are confident, and our thought patterns will be predominantly positive.

Conclusion

Accomplished RAAM riders are among the most mentally strong athletes that you will ever come across. We stand to learn much about the mental side of ultra cycling by listening to what they have to say about their experiences. As we have seen, RAAM riders may not always consciously employ specific techniques that enhance their mental strength, but they intuitively seem to have developed mental strategies that aid their performances. The fact, though, that most accomplished RAAM riders do not use formal techniques to enhance their mental strength also suggests that this may be an area of ultra cycling that is largely untapped by its participants.