



**Coach's Corner, Buffalo Stampede**

**By Brendan Davies**

## **Part 9: Mentally preparing to race and Managing pre-race nerves**

### **Mentally preparing to race**

In preparation for the Stampede, we have up to now pretty much focused on the physiological adaptations – getting stronger, faster and fitter. Now it's time to squeeze out the extra percent by mentally preparing ourselves for the race. For the first part of this article, I'm going to focus on one tried and trusted techniques, visualisation.

#### **What is Visualisation?**

Visualisation is the technique of using your imagination and mind to visualise specific things you want to happen and achieve. Visualisation can be done at any time; and hopefully you've all been practising this to some degree in training. But now it is time to get race specific and 'get in the zone' for race day.

The key to visualisation is to keep it positive. We all, to differing degrees, experience the negative thoughts, and managing these is discussed in the next section. Visualisation should always be used to assist your performance. In fact, research has shown that visualisation is so powerful that if used negatively it will impact your performance on race day by creating these negative conditions – the 'self fulfilling prophecy'.

The next step is to keep your visualisation achievable. This is a tough race, so perhaps visualising finishing will be your goal. Visualise how you want to be feeling physically and emotionally after the race. Others may have goals to finish at a certain time or position. Visualisation can also be used on for tackling the most difficult sections of the course. You may visualise how you are going to climb Clear Spot for example; the output of effort and how you want your body to be feeling on this section.

You may want to create a few key phrases or words to remind you of your visualisations. For example, you might use 'in control' written on your arm to remind you of the effort level that will help you reach your goal. Also, make sure you visualise how you are going to deal with the inevitable bad patches that you may go through. Visualise the way that you are going to deal with these

scenarios and the feeling you will when you come out the other side. Also, remind yourself of the tough training sessions, the times you have overcome difficult situations in previous races and draw on these experiences in your pre race visualisations.

I have found one of the best times to practise visualisation is when I'm lying in bed just about to drift off. If I know the course well enough, even if I've just studied the elevation profile, I like to go through from the start to the end of the race; systematically visualising how I want to be feeling along the entire course and of course achieving the set goal. Even after you do doze off, your subconscious will go to work and embed these positive thoughts and goals deep into your mind.

In these last couple of weeks, make time each day to go over your key visualisations. Even on race morning, find a quiet moment and go over the main visualisations again and let the power of your mind take over!

### **Managing pre-race nerves**

Pre-race nerves are not-so-pleasant, debilitating for some, and experienced by all. When we think about performing, we don't often think of the usefulness of these 'nerves'- however, they can help us to focus before and during a race and they activate us to assist in the physical and organisational aspects of race preparation. There is a tipping point, where the impact of this pre-race stress becomes no longer useful, and it is that I will focus on in this week's Coach's Corner.

Pre-race nerves can also be called stress, anxiety, worry, butterflies, the fidgets, the following-Facebook-updates-obsessively, or the race day race to the loo. These nerves are sourced in the body's threat preparation system, otherwise known as the Fight, Flight or Freeze response. When anyone has a race they are approaching that has a lot of personal meaning for them, either due to internal or external pressure to perform, apprehension regarding the unknown, or being unsure about my body's capacity to cope, part of the brain recognises that this experience that is approaching could perhaps threaten me- my sense of self, my identity, my safety, my standing amongst my friends or in the running community etc. This perceived threat activates that fight/flight/freeze response. This F/F/F response is the thing that triggers off our worrying or obsessive thinking, activates our tummies going into overdrive, contributes to disrupted sleep, makes us feel short tempered or stressed, and creates that strange 'I just HAVE to check what people are saying about the race/conditions/their preparation on Facebook' phenomenon. I will break it down into the four main areas that this stress response impacts on, with a couple of examples in each, and some brief ways you may be able to reduce (but not remove) the impact of these symptoms.

#### **Emotional**

*Example feelings:*

- Irritable
- Short tempered
- Stressed
- Anxious

- Unhappy
- Generally changeable or moody

*Coping:*

- This can be difficult to tackle directly. However, ensuring you have pleasant events- things you enjoy- aside from running, scheduled, will help balance out the unpleasant emotions with some more enjoyable ones. Schedule a coffee or a chat or plan to watch a game of footy on the TV with a mate. You can also do things by yourself such as putting on upbeat music that you enjoy, looking through photo albums, or watching a comedy or rom-com (but not an intense drama or horror film- you're trying to generate a different emotion to fear remember!).
- Mindfulness and meditation, although they are mental techniques, can also directly influence mood.

Speak with those closest to you, and pre-warn them- make plans for the way you'll cope with the probable added tension and stress.

**Mental**

*Example thoughts:*

- 'I won't cope'
- 'My pain/injury will flare up and it will be a disaster'
- 'What if I make a fool of myself'
- 'What if I don't sleep the night before'
- 'I hate hills, this is going to be terrible'
- Your thinking being generally 'sticky' and difficult to stop

*Coping:*

- Remember it is the brain's *perception* of threat, that the reality is I *have* coped before and I will likely cope again, that people like me for more than my performances, that my safety is actually covered by the race organisers as well as my own pack and my preparation.
- Find the extreme language in my thinking (it will be a *disaster*, it will be *terrible*) and soften it (it may be difficult, I might find it hard, but I've found things hard before).
- Use maths. Yes, maths! My thought: 'It will be a disaster if I don't sleep the night before the race'. Ok, how many races have I been in? Let's say 40 races. How many times have I not slept well before the race? Maybe half, so 20. And how many times has it been a disaster that my sleep was poor? Probably none, maybe one. So I have at worst a 1 in 20 chance that if I sleep poorly it will be a disaster (and by disaster, that may mean not getting a PB even though I felt like I was on track for one..... a true disaster).
- Ask yourself- the thing I am worried about- is it probable or just possible? It's usually possible, but NOT probable.
- Use a mantra, especially during the event, such as 'This is tough (an acknowledgement of reality), but I am tougher (positive, and an acknowledgement of something I have evidence for)'.
- Cut yourself some slack- it's just a race: "*One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one's work is terribly important.*" —Bertrand Russell, *Conquest of Happiness*

## Physical

### *Example physical symptoms:*

- Upset tummy (nausea, diarrhoea)
- Muscle tension
- Tiredness
- Agitation
- Poor sleep
- Headaches

### *Coping:*

- Exercise when you can- it can be tricky if you're meant to be tapering, but as it is appropriate, it will use up some of the hormones associated with the stress response.
- Sleep hygiene- try to get up at the same time each day- it's the time you get up, not the time you go to bed that sets your body clock. Keep your bedroom as dark, quiet, and temperature appropriate as possible. Only use your bed for sex and sleep - it's better to avoid reading, watching TV, being on an electronic device in bed. Also- remind yourself that it is not a disaster if your sleep is not great- the more pressure you put on yourself to sleep 'properly', the more tense you'll be, and the more elusive sleep will be. Set yourself up for a good sleep, but try 'holding it lightly'- take an easy-going attitude to it.
- Breathing exercises- slowing your breathing down will send the message to your brain, body and emotions that you *are* relaxed, and help you feel more relaxed. You can do this as part of yoga, part of a formal meditation, or using a breathing session found on a relaxation CD or online MP3. Some simple online examples (both transcript and MP3) are:  
<https://www.dartmouth.edu/~healthed/relax/downloads.html>

## Behavioural

### *Example behaviours:*

- Excessive checking- gear, Facebook, weather, elevation profile etc
- Going for runs when you 'shouldn't' eg taper time, when it's not on your training plan etc
- Using Dr Google, or seeking extra reassurance from your physio re an injury, when you've already been getting appropriate treatment
- Seeking reassurance from other runners, or family/friends, in an excessive way (checking in once, if you're on a training run with them is normal, talking about it before the run, 3 times during the run, after the run and via text later is excessive)
- Totally shutting yourself off from other runners/the running community, so that you don't have to think about the race

### *Coping:*

- Stop checking. Just stop it! Give yourself permission for a certain amount of reasonable checking, and limit yourself to that. For example, when you've signed up for a race, check the gear requirements, and make a plan to obtain anything you don't have. A couple of weeks out, pull all your gear out to make sure you have it, in good repair. Then a couple of days before, you can check it again, against the requirements. Then the day or night before, pack it up as it needs to be. You can unpack and repack once, maximum twice. Then leave it.

The more you check, the more your brain will find to think and worry about ('but how *will* I cope if it rains, this rain jacket seems so light'... etc etc).

- Take regular breaks from all things running- this will help you find value in yourself and your life, and create interference with the running related checking behaviours- if I am busy chatting with a non-running friend, and laughing, I can't also be at the same time seeking reassurance online or via texts.
- Each of these areas will also feed the next, so for example if I am caught up in the mental (worry), that may lead me to pull out my gear again (behavioural) which may increase my heart rate (physical) and lead to me feeling fearful (emotional) as I start to wonder about the weight of my gear (mental). It is a self feeding cycle, which means it is important to stop it as soon as you notice it, but you can stop it through any or all of the above techniques, as a breaker to the cycle, that most effectively works with the symptoms you personally experience the most.