

## Coach's Corner - David Glover

*"Don't aim at success – the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue..."*

- Viktor Frankl, author of Man's Search for Meaning

# Mental Fitness



Photo: Dan Hicok - www.danhicok.com

David Glover at the Kinetic Half (Lake Anna, VA)

I BELIEVE there are four components to successfully racing a triathlon of any distance:

1. Physical Fitness
2. Equipment Choice
3. Race Execution
4. Mental Fitness.

Like many Ironman-distance athletes, I spend anywhere from 10 to 25 hours per week training my body to increase my endurance and speed. I purchase the best equipment, practice my nutrition during my training, and participate in two to four "B" races in order to gauge my fitness and practice race execution for my

"A" race. However, it has not been until recently that I deliberately worked on my "mental fitness", both before and during my races. I hazard to guess that this is one area that many other athletes neglect as well.

### What is "mental fitness?"

By mental fitness, I mean an athlete's state of mind and attitude leading up to and throughout race day.

### Why is "mental fitness" important for a triathlete?

A few years ago, I knew a local triathlete who had qualified for the Ironman World Championship in Hawaii via the lottery. A successful athlete at both sprint and international distances, she looked at a Hawaii finish as necessary addition to her already impressive triathlon resume. However, when I spoke to her on several occasions in the months preceding the event, she frequently complained about enjoying neither the long training rides nor the training time commitment. I perceived that she had a very negative attitude towards her upcoming race. Not surprisingly, she fell short both of her own expectations and of what she realistically could have accomplished on race day. Hawaii was also the last Ironman she ever did.

Contrast that story with a coaching client of mine who recently competed in the Eagleman 70.3 triathlon in June. She had successfully transitioned from being injured in the winter to being healthy and training consistently week to week during the spring. Unfortunately, work travel had disrupted her training over the several weeks leading up to Eagleman, making her question her fitness and hurting her confidence. After going back and forth on whether or not to do the race, we talked about having her unload her expectations and just

have "fun." So she raced for fun, enjoyed the experience and set a new personal best time by 15 minutes. Now, she is eager to race again and looking forward to racing an Ironman in the late fall.

Mental fitness is important for any triathlete, as it can mean the difference between success and failure-- however an individual defines them. We can exercise our minds as well as our bodies. This article discusses mental preparation both before and during racing.

### Pre-race Mental Preparation

*"What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?"*

- Unknown author

Positive thinking and planning in the months and weeks leading up to an event will set the stage for a successful race.

When I recently asked local triathlete and Olympic-hopeful Margie Shapiro in an e-mail what she does to prepare mentally before a race, she replied back, "Visualization and affirmation."

I decided to follow Margie's advice as I prepared for the Quelle Challenge in Germany in June. Several times each day, I would rehearse the race in my mind, visualizing not only the execution of each stage but the sensations I would feel, the choices I would make, and the thoughts that might run through my head. To stretch myself and create inspiration, I developed a short list of aspirations, time goals that were achievable on paper but far beyond anything I had accomplished to date. For affirmation of my goals, I wrote down what I wanted to happen in my race. I began with my strategy, then my accomplishments this year, then the positive choices I had made and the actions I had taken – such as hiring a coach and



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revamping my nutrition plan – that would get me to a place to accomplish my goals. Each day, I looked at my goals and my affirmation as a reminder to reaffirm my purpose and my desire.

Maintaining a positive attitude leading up to the race is essential for success, as my Ironman Hawaii friend discovered. For myself, I try to view setbacks, such as crashing during a race, as challenges and confidence builders. If I can pick myself up after a hard crash and race well, then I know I have the desire to reach my goals. I also surround myself with positive-thinking people that reinforce my own positive thinking. Truthfully, all athletes will have “bad days” in slow training times or because of unexpected life events, but I have found that realizing that the “bad” days are only temporary helps me get through them more quickly. Rather than think about the “bad” things that happen on a “bad” day, pick out and focus on the “good” things that happen instead.

A final pre-race strategy is to plan ahead in order to minimize mental distress in the last week before the race. Spending the extra time a few weeks or even months in advance of a race to accomplish race-related tasks creates a less-stressful mental state on race day. Tasks that can be done ahead of time include purchasing missing gear, tuning up the bike, riding in a race set up, and practicing with on-course nutrition products.

The ultimate pre-race mental fitness goal should be to arrive at the swim start on race day full of confidence and eager to compete.

### Race Day Strategies

*“He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How.”*

- Nietzsche

A fundamental question to ask and answer on race day is, “Why?” The answer lies solely with

the individual, but it’s a question I repeatedly ask myself during every race, especially when the conditions become tough or obstacles appear. The answer for “Why?” might mean the difference between running and walking or walking and quitting.

In a presentation, triathlon legend David Scott gave a powerful piece of advice. It was simply, “Be in the moment.” In other words, focus on what you can do in the here and now instead of dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.

I closely link “being in the moment” with a state called “flow.” Flow author, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, describes flow as, “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.” Csikszentmihalyi goes on to say that, “The best moments occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult or worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something we can make happen.”

By focusing on the moment and working towards accomplishing our goals, whether our goals are to finish a sprint race or win an Ironman, we can create an optimal experience and

an optimal state of mind, which puts us in a place to better satisfy ourselves to get to the “Why?”

### “Stuff” happens.

“Stuff” always seems to occur during a race, whether it’s a flat tire, choppy swim conditions, a dropped water bottle, or oppressive heat on the run. Sometimes we can control the “stuff” and sometimes we can’t. Either way, the choice we then have as athletes is how we respond to these obstacles - whether we get angry and frustrated or simply shrug and focus on the next moment of the race. I suggest the latter. By being “in the moment” and not focusing on “stuff,” it is much easier to move forward and achieve success.

At the end of the day, triathlon can and should be a rewarding experience.

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*After leaving his desk job at Capital One in 2006, David took a leap of faith to follow his passion for triathlon by competing, coaching and race directing full-time. Now competing as an elite (professional) triathlete, David has completed more than seventy triathlons including twenty-two Ironman®-distance races since 1995. At the Ironman distance, he has personal best time of 8:51 with four overall wins. He is also a six-time USA Triathlon All-American. For more information about David, visit his web site at [www.davidglover.net](http://www.davidglover.net). For more information about his races and coaching services, please visit [www.enduranceworks.net](http://www.enduranceworks.net). ★*

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*Tri-DC congratulates David Glover on an amazing season including three iron distance races: 8:51 at the Quelle Challenge, 9:55 at Ironman Louisville, and an overall victory in 9:17 at Vineman. We are happy to have David as a regular contributing author.*

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## RECOMMENDED READING

**Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience**  
 by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

**Flow in Sports: The Keys to Optimal Experiences and Performances**  
 by Susan A. Jackson and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

**Man’s Search for Meaning**  
 by Viktor E. Frankl

