

Mind Game

Train Your Mind Through Your Body

By: Chris White

Just this morning I heard a clip from an interview with the late George Steinbrenner. In that interview Steinbrenner said (and I paraphrase), “I believe every man has the ability to give 110%. The trick is getting a person to access the extra 10 percent.” This document is an investigation into the last 10 percent. It is an investigation beyond the physical and into the psychological characteristics I believe define champions. Much of my evidence is based on observation and the secondhand personal experiences of those who have seemingly mastered their chosen endeavors. However, just recently I have set out on my own personal journey to uncover why some athletes reach unprecedented heights and why others do not.

The first point of clarification is that self-mastery and personal success don't just happen. In fact, success at any level requires dedication, consistency, and many hours of preparation. It requires an unwavering desire to overcome the incessant tug of mediocrity that has defined humanity as of late. Naturally, people seek paths of ease and comfort over paths of challenge and difficulty. One definition of *human* makes such a point: *characteristics of people opposed to God or animals or machines, especially susceptible to weakness, and therefore showing the qualities of man.* To be weak is to be human. To be fearful is to be human. To cultivate an aura of invisibility with words and excuses is nothing more than a disguise of weakness. We are all vulnerable to failure and humility. But from those who have conquered themselves (specifically their minds) and achieved in the face of adversity there is much to be learned.

There is no disputing the mind-body connection. The mind is so powerful that it can either drag or inhibit the body. This has been proven over and over again. What is conceived in the mind is experienced as ultimately reality at a cellular level. If improvements in VO2 Max, lactate threshold, and motor unit recruitment can all be achieved through training so too can the ability to “control” the thoughts occupying our minds, or ignore them altogether. Training, if it is constructed properly, should be just as much about the mind as it is the body. In other words, training must impart psychological stress. It must place the athlete into situations of suffering,

pain, and decision-making so that when suffering and pain occur during performance they are experienced against the backdrop of familiarity.

One of my athletes always asks me, "where do you go (in your head) when everything inside you is screaming STOP, STOP, STOP!" My answer has evolved as I have evolved and as my experiences and training have evolved. I use to argue with myself in an effort to convince my physiology that I was not in pain; that the burning in my legs and chest wasn't there; that oxygen was being delivery with ease to every cell in my body and that I could continue indefinitely. But ultimately these conversations become sourer as time passes and pain increases. The reality is you cannot reverse the physiological impact of training or competition. It is an inherent consequence of doing work. You *can* however change how you experience it.

True mastery of the mind transcends all activities. The principals of mental mastery are relevant no matter what you're doing and should be applied to all aspects of life, whether your washing dishes or battling for the top spot on the podium. The Buddhist philosophy believes the purpose of life is to live in the present moment. Bruce Lee also discusses this in his writing. He states, "True mastery is the ability, through self-discipline, to be calm, fully aware, and completely in tune with oneself and his surroundings. Then, and only then, can a person know himself."

Instead of ignoring the sensations of suffering and pain one must learn to become more present and more aware, not in the pain itself but in the associated aspects of the present moment. Controlling one's breathing, staying calm, loose, and in tune with all aspects of the body should be the focus. In our gym we place tremendous amounts of stress on our athletes. Physical and mental breakdowns often occur, but not without reward. Each opportunity to "experience" pain and suffering in an artificial environment is practice for the real thing. If training is to be fully transferable it must access both the physical and mental capacities of the individual.

Giving 110% in athletic endeavors is not merely a matter of physical conditioning. More accurately it is a matter of psychological mastery. Train your mind through your body. Training the body without the mind is worthless. Force yourself to suffer during training so you may learn to live in that suffering with a calm and controllable demeanor. This is the key to athletic performance. This is the key to self-mastery.