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5 Running a psyching team: Providing mental support at long-distance running events

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## 13 Abstract

14 Psyching teams provide brief psychological support to participants before, during, and after  
15 long distance running events such as marathons. Developed and refined over the past 30  
16 years, psyching teams benefit runners themselves, provide mental skills training and hands on  
17 experience to team members, and help de-mystify sport psychology. Using one particular  
18 model, this article is designed to describe both the content and process of psyching teams and  
19 offer information for others' development of similar volunteer programs.

20 Keywords: psychological support, marathon, outreach activities

21

## Running a Psyching Team: Providing mental support at long-distance running events

### **In the Beginning...**

In 1985, after some years of offering advice “on the run” during marathon events, a psychiatrist and psychologist created a “psyching team” for the New York City Marathon (Bloom, 1998). The team recruited local mental health professionals to provide brief, strategic mental skills tips to runners before the race start. Over the years, various methods of assisting runners before, during, and/or after road races have developed, ranging from booths at community events to medical involvement at race conclusion (Hays & Katchen, 2006). Models of recruitment, training, and service have included graduate student-led, sport psychology program-led, and professional psychologist/sport psychologist-led programs (Day et al., 2014). Typically directed by a sport psychology or allied science professional, each of these models varies in where they get their energy, support – financial and otherwise – and practical organization. In the sections that follow, we describe a full-service model that has been developed and refined in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

### **Purpose of Psyching Teams**

Nearly 50 years ago, an American Psychological Association president spoke of the value of “giving psychology away” (Miller, 1969). Psyching teams are designed to give sport psychology away,” that is, to offer mental skills assistance to runners in a public forum. Sometimes, this is at an individual level; in other instances, informal groups or activities create opportunities for large-scale training in mental skills (Day et al., 2014). Beyond this manifest goal, psyching teams offer an opportunity for training, whether of sport psychology students with minimal opportunity to practice what they have been learning at a theoretical level, or to introduce mental health professionals to the field of applied sport psychology (Hays & Katchen, 2006). Because psyching teams are present at public events, there is also an opportunity for increased exposure and de-mystification to the general public of the

benefits of sport psychology, whether through websites, public events such as ‘carbo’ dinners where food is served to runners, or social and traditional media (Day et al., 2014).

### **Intervention Strategies**

Sport psychology offers a seemingly unending number of interventions that can be useful for endurance athletes. In all arenas of practice, performance interventions will ideally be matched to the needs of the individual(s) receiving them, as well as the competence of the individual(s) providing them. Organizers of psyching teams have implemented a variety of interventions in an effort to identify the appropriate strategies for the unique settings that are encountered at race expos (an exposition, typically held the day(s) before a race) and starting lines. Many of the interventions are “traditional” mental skills techniques. To sport psychology-trained practitioners, they may appear to be “no-brainer” approaches to brief contact with marathoners. Others are creative takes on strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective in research settings. The following interventions have been used in psyching teams across the world. These strategies have been selected intentionally, taking into account the demands specific to endurance events such as marathon running. For example, long distance runners have reported experiencing relatively high levels of pain and discomfort, wanting to give up, and an increasingly negative attitude as the distance gets greater (Buman, Brewer, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2008; Samson, Simpson, Kamphoff, & Langlier, 2015). Although there is limited empirical evidence of sport-specific psychological skills training programs (Birrer & Morgan, 2010), research has demonstrated that psychological skills interventions improve endurance performance (McCormick, Meijen, & Marcora, 2015). An empirical question remains with regard to psyching teams: whether brief, one-time interventions with amateur—often first-time—runners have measurable impact on affective experience or actual performance.

Psyching team members receive training in contextually appropriate mental skills. Among the most frequently used mental skills techniques (MST) are strategies that attend to runners' appropriate level of arousal, goal setting, imagery, cognitive strategies, and anchoring. These process-oriented strategies are designed to enhance runners' race experience. Although described one at a time, typically psyching team members may select a couple of techniques most appropriate to the particular situation.

### **Arousal Management**

Many athletes use psyching team members to help them get their "nerves" under control. When speaking to psyching team members, runners regularly describe somatic symptoms of hyperarousal; they may describe themselves as "freaking out," "scared," "nervous," or "terrified." Arousal management strategies are designed to help athletes gain more control over our bodily functions and responses (e.g., Williams, 2010). Diaphragmatic breathing or other methods of arousal control can be explained for use both in athletic settings as well as in many non-sport settings. Breathing techniques can act as short-term stress relief (Rausch, Gramling, & Auerbach, 2006). Slowing down one's breathing rate assists in slowing down the connected body systems that contribute to the somatic symptoms associated with anxiety or arousal (Hazlett-Stevens & Craske, 2009).

Psyching team members will often ask runners about their somatic experience and level of tension. Runners are then presented with a description of the physical systems related to arousal and educated on the impact this can have on both running performance and psychological aspects of the race. Psyching team members then guide the athletes through basic breathing exercises or progressive muscle relaxation. At race expos, a handout description can serve to reinforce and further inform runners. Athletes at a number of races have commented on the significant positive impact they felt this particular intervention had on their race experience (Day et al., 2014; Hays, 2007).

## **Goal Setting**

Inquiring about marathoners' goals is one way to engage them and also assist in specific and realistic but challenging goal setting (Weinberg & Gould, 2014). At the stage when psyching team members interact with runners, the focus is not about providing education about how to set goals, but rather about how to put these goals into race day context. Because runners may approach a race with one "do or die" goal (Scholz, Nagy, Schuz, & Ziegelmann, 2008), they may benefit from developing multiple levels of goals. These may include goals related to the process, such as using strategies to assess and manage pain, or the more obvious outcome goals such as race completion times.

When athletes set goals that they are unlikely to attain, underperformance can significantly impact their affective response to the event (Gaudreau, Blondin, & Lapierre, 2002). A negative affective response in performance may decrease the likelihood that an athlete would engage in a similar event in the future.

A practical application of this concept, well-received by athletes, is the idea of having three different levels of goals for the race. Athletes are asked to identify a dream goal, one that would be achievable under perfect conditions. Next they think of a goal with which they could be happy if things go less than perfectly for them. And finally, they identify an acceptable goal, the bare minimum they could leave the race satisfied with if things do not go as expected on race day. Setting these three goals can help to control negative thoughts or feelings of disappointment both during and after the race.

## **Imagery**

Imagery, defined as creating or re-creating experiences in the mind (Vealey & Greenleaf, 2010), is another intervention implemented during psyching team interactions. Imagery can be used to help direct a runner's attention or to supplement many of the other strategies discussed. Using imagery as an intervention has been shown to increase self-

confidence related to performance (Hall et al., 2009; Hammond, Gregg, Hrycaiko, Mactavish, & Leslie-Toogood, 2012). The less experienced the athlete is with imagery, the greater impact its use may have on confidence (Hall et al., 2009).

Imagery as a psychological strategy can be challenging to teach due to the short time available with participants; it is therefore helpful to identify or build on a participant's experience with the use of imagery, to keep the imagery simple, and to respond to the participant's symbolic language. Even though the research literature may be equivocal regarding the effectiveness of associative compared with dissociative cognitive strategies (Brick, MacIntyre, & Campbell, 2014), for first-time marathoners—often the runners who make use of psyching team services—just knowing that they can shift from one to the other can be useful. A psyching team member might talk a participant through imagining running with a smooth stride (an associative strategy), perhaps with an aural (“smooth”) cue as well as the visual/kinaesthetic sensation. A more dissociative strategy to distract from feeling worried might be imagining a calm sea to help feel calmer at the start of the race. Developing specific images (visual, phrases, words) at particular cue spots or at pre-determined distance markers can also help participants meet the challenges of the race.

Physical pain is a component of distance running of concern to many new runners. Imagery related to pain management can be particularly useful for runners (Munroe, Giacobbi, Hall, & Weinberg, 2000) to help them prepare for dealing with pain or discomfort. At the same time, the psyching team member should emphasize the importance of maintaining some awareness regarding pain that signals the need to modify one's running pace.

### **Cognitive Strategies**

“Self-talk,” that is, the ways in which one creates an inner dialogue with oneself, is a critical component of MST, especially in endurance events such as marathons. Although



athletes may be able to think of positive self-talk statements on demand, distance events frequently require different self-talk strategies than do shorter tasks (Van Raalte, Morrey, Cornelius, & Brewer, 2015). Running-task related self-talk, whether motivational or instructional, appears to be more effective than neutral self-talk (see Bertollo et al., 2015; Hamilton, Scott, & MacDougall, 2007) or no self-talk (Miller & Donohue, 2003).

Motivational self-talk can be helpful for gross motor skill tasks such as running (Theodorakis, Weinberg, Natsis, Douma, & Kazakas, 2000). Both motivational and instructional self-talk can be beneficial in reducing ratings of perceived effort and controlling emotions in endurance events (Barwood, Corbett, Wagstaff, McVeigh, & Thelwell, 2015; Blanchfield, Hardy, de Morree, Staiano, & Marcora, 2014). Research findings (Van Raalte et al., 2015) as well as observational and anecdotal information (Day et al., 2014) note that marathon runners mostly use motivational self-talk during marathons.

In assisting runners to develop motivational self-talk, it is important to help them identify positive motivational statements that are relevant to them and within their control. Short phrases such as “keep going” or “I can beat this hill” can be beneficial. Emotion-related words such as “smile” can also be helpful in controlling negative emotions. Some researchers have even suggested that deliberately smiling can result in more positive affect and feelings of exertion compared to frowning (Philippen, Bakker, Oudejans, & Canal-Bruland, 2012).

Although motivational strategies are useful, instructional self-talk may also be relevant. Using “running form”-related phrases such as “smooth stride” or “steady pace” can help runners focus on their race, in the present moment.

No matter how well prepared one is, distance events, especially for those who do not have much experience with them, can seem daunting, especially just prior to the race as well as during the race. Both rational discourse and logistical assurance can be important in managing these worries.

Psyching team members often assist runners in differentiating the aspects of the race that they do and do not have control over. Reminders of their training experience, course knowledge, or plans regarding pacing are all “controllables.” On the other hand, weather, other athlete traffic, unanticipated physical symptoms, or unforeseen issues on course are “uncontrollable.” Expecting the unexpected and maintaining acceptance throughout the race are cognitive skills that athletes can learn.

Psyching team members should anticipate that runners—and particularly first-timers—may worry about what to expect on race day. It is therefore important for psyching team members to familiarize themselves with race details prior to the event. This may include reviewing the race course information to learn things like locations of water stops or whether there are pace teams at the event. Similarly, on race morning psyching team members are encouraged to arrive early enough to find the portable toilets, corrals, and bag drop at race start. Being able to answer these questions helps to reduce the anxieties that runners may experience the morning of the race.

### **Anchoring: “Going to the Well” and Symbolic Reminders**

Psyching teams’ brief interventions often emphasize or build on runners’ own strengths or capabilities to support self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Runners may be invited to “go to the well” of their own experience, recalling how they have best handled similar challenges in the past. Athletes who are new to an event may find it difficult to feel confident in their training and preparation. They are more likely to follow the pace of others rather than relying on their own training pace. Starting too fast due to the presence of other runners can interfere with subsequent performance (Renfree & St Clair Gibson, 2013). Emphasizing the importance of trusting one’s training and focusing on running one’s own race can be a key concept to reinforce with newer athletes. One strategy to assist runners in trusting their training is to ask them for successes they achieved during their training that they may not

have believed they could do. Discussing these successes brings these positive memories to the forefront, thus “anchoring” runners’ sense of self and increasing runners’ confidence in their abilities. Imagery is often an important component as well: recalling the past in order to anticipate the future.

Runners also are often eager to pin on small pieces of fluorescent plastic tape or race colored ribbon that are described as pieces of the finish line. This anchoring method, unique to psyching teams, was initially developed for research purposes, to identify runners who had spoken to members of the psyching team (Hays, personal communication, 2014). Over the years, however, finish line ribbons have evolved into a key part of the tool box of psyching teams. Often at the conclusion of an intervention, the psyching team member offers this piece of ribbon, helping the athlete make use of it as a method of recalling the key points of the intervention (Hays & Katchen, 2006). The use of this type of symbolic reference is similar to some charity races in which participants wear a ribbon or write down the name of someone they are running for to remember their reasons for running and to help them through the difficult parts of the race (for example see King, 2003). Alternatively, some psyching teams have used plastic wrist bands in a distinctive color, encouraging the runner to write a key word or phrase on the band.

### **Psyching Team Structure**

Although all psyching teams have many of the same goals, each psyching team has unique elements that are a function of, among other things: the particular race course, types of participants, the interests and strengths of the psyching team director and members, and the interests and support provided by the race director and race organization (Day et al., 2014).

### **Before the Race**

Examples of the types of services offered before the race include free workshops for participants, whether in the months preceding the race or during the race expo. These

workshops or other MST techniques can also be offered via social media, such as blogs, Facebook, Instagrams, Twitter or as a webinar. Many psyching teams are available during the race expo, providing both relevant written materials as well as the opportunity for one-on-one interventions. Pasta Dinners, often held the evening before a race, can give another opportunity for an invited speaker to describe, teach, or review essential MST for the following day.

### **During the Race**

The “classic” psyching team MST interventions occur at race start, where participants may be waiting with increasing tension for the race start. In some races, “psychs on bikes” are available at strategic points along the race course to assist runners at some of the more challenging spots on the course, such as steep hills or the area around Mile 18 or so where severe fatigue (aka “The Wall”) may set in. Psyching team members may also be deployed especially toward the end of the race course, to walk or run with participants who are struggling with the final few miles. These on-course activities occur only with the support and approval of the race organization and the others, such as bike marshals, who are needed on the course for reasons of safety.

### **Race Finish**

Some psyching teams are integrated into the medical tent as one element of the medical team. Their role may such disparate elements as cognitive assessment, support for recovery, management of thwarted expectations, or engagement with families concerned about a loved one’s condition. Psyching team members may also help runners as they leave the finish line chute and begin processing their race goals and performance.

### **Developing a Psyching Team**

As the concept of psyching teams gains popularity, so does the idea of starting one for a particular race. This enthusiasm is often contagious, but without considering some of the

established best practices, success can be limited. Although details can vary based on selected race, the following aspects are among those that appear to be most critical for building a successful marathon psyching team.

### **Selecting a Race**

Selecting the right race in the right city is imperative to the success of a psyching team. Among relevant considerations, potential psyching team directors should develop plans regarding access to a particular race as well as the logistical aspects of incorporating a psyching team into that race.

Race directors are the gate keepers to the race, the ones who will give psyching team members access to athletes or prevent that access. The number one barrier to launching a successful marathon psyching team is resistance from the executive staff of the race. Likewise, their appreciation of the “value added” engagement of a psyching team becomes the foundation for successful incorporation of a psyching team into a particular race.

In order to “sell” the idea to a race director, a psyching team director must be adequately prepared to describe what a psyching team is and how it can benefit athletes and their race experience. If possible, it helps to have or create a connection to the race director. Executive race staff members will have many questions about this new concept. Consulting with longstanding psyching team founders and members (see [www.psychingteams.com](http://www.psychingteams.com)) can provide adequate information to answer those questions in order to get that much needed “let’s do this” from a race director. It is better for a psyching team to start small, with a few useful services that are appreciated, than to proffer a wide range that cannot be fully accomplished. This enables incremental growth, based on observational learning and feedback from team members, race staff, and runners.

An ideal “mature” psyching team offers interventions available to the athletes at multiple points through the process. This includes the race expo (or identified packet pickup

location), the corrals at the starting area of the race, at important designated points along the race course, and at the finish line area of the race. Different strategies, as identified above, are useful at different stages of the race.

All psyching team volunteers need to be aware of the health and safety issues that come with the course. It may not be safe, for example, to run along with the participants at certain parts of the course. Being able to communicate with the executive staff on race day is essential. We recommend that race organizers include psyching team directors in their risk assessment plans before the event.

### **Recruitment, Selection, and Training of Psyching Team Members**

Psyching teams that are led by professional psychologists or sport psychologists function most effectively by recruiting and selecting mental health professionals, sport psychologists, and graduate students in these fields. Training, whether on site or at a distance, should include, minimally: training in brief MST methods, an opportunity for practice, and logistical information. If logistics precludes on-site training, workshops can be held via Skype or through online video. In addition, the psyching team director needs to ensure that team members have key logistical information, such as course details, road closures, meeting location, starting times, as well as safety details. First time psyching team organizers may also find the podcasts on the psyching teams website ([www.psychingteams.com](http://www.psychingteams.com)) helpful.

The development of a sense of “team” is critical to smooth functioning; it can be augmented by insignia and visible indicators of team membership (e.g., labelled caps, t-shirts, jackets). During training, practice, and actual interventions, it is helpful to pair up less experienced psyching team with more experienced practitioners to ensure that appropriate care is provided to runners.

### **Evaluation and Recommendations for Future Psyching Teams**

Considering the presence of psyching teams at long distance events in the United States, Canada, and Europe it is clear that there is a demand for and appreciation of the services provided by psyching teams. The issues that psyching teams encounter when speaking to participants vary widely, as does the physical and psychological skill level of the runners who make use of the support provided by the psyching team. Psychological support at mass participation events provides specific skills that runners can use. Further, psyching teams offer training and practice to participating team members and serve to de-mystify the process of psychological support for optimal performance. Self-report feedback, from runners, psyching team members, and race staff indicates a high degree of appreciation for these services.

We recommend that potential psyching team directors obtain initial experience by participating in an established psyching team and make use of current information about psyching teams. Starting small, recruiting well, obtaining feedback, and building incrementally on success will all be useful in the establishment and maintenance of a psyching team. There is also great potential for adapting this psyching team model to other popular events such as bike racing or triathlons.

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