

RACING WITH YOUR HEAD

By Andy Shields
NDC Member 2010-11



When the training season ends, the racing season begins... I know this is Earth-shatteringly obvious, but what I intended with this over simplistic statement is to imply a concept I feel is extremely important to all serious skiers when racing season rolls around. That concept is: (drum roll)....When the training season ends, all that hard work you put in over the summer and fall doing those long zone 1 rollerskis, gruelling workouts at the gym, and those zone 5 striding workouts that make you want to puke (or do puke as the case may be) are now in the bank. They are done, and if your training went well, you will be in very good shape.



Which is good, because the racing season is a busy time for us skiers, especially those on a training centre like myself. Traveling across the country and the world, racing week-in and week-out leaves us with a schedule that does not offer much time for continued training opportunities during the winter. Most of our time spent not racing is allocated to 'damage control' recovery workouts, or at best, fitness maintaining workouts as long as we're not preparing for the next set of races. To say the least, the time to make gains in terms of physical fitness during the racing season is hard to find, so logically, why not focus your energies on something you can get better at in the midst of the racing frenzy? Enter: Psychology.

Sports Psychology is one of my favourite muses. I guess it appeals to my sort of underdog personality in that I'm a bit small physically, but it doesn't mean I can't have the biggest and best mental game of anyone out on the racecourse. Also, it is the most under-emphasized aspect of skiing there is, so any gains I make in this field are ones my competition probably isn't making thus it's a great way to get ahead. One of the great things about your mental game is that you can work on it, and get better at it, throughout the racing season. The racing season is probably the best time to work on it because it is close time-wise to racing – so it's fresh in your mind what you need to work on based on your recently past performance. I know I'm still hard at work on mine and I'd like to share what I'm working on with you, and show you the 'not-trodden-enough-paths' I've been waking on my quest for psychological superiority.

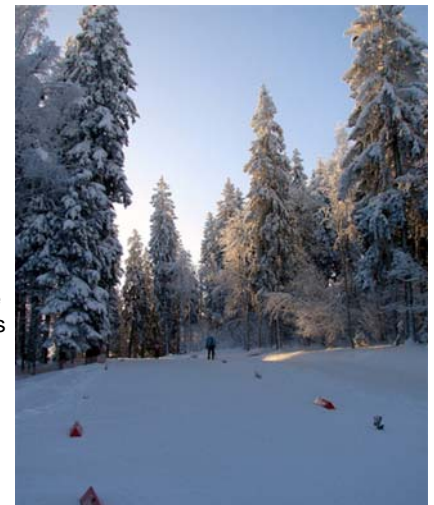


Me Racing at World Junior Championships in Estonia

The time when your mental game is most handy, in Andy's opinion, is in the days and hours before the start of a race or time trial or whatever kind of performance you want to do well in. This is called "getting psyched". Focusing on ski racing, during the days and hours before the start of the event, people try to find a balance

between arousal, and relaxation – at least according to the textbook – to get psyched. I don't really know how to find this perfect groove where a balance of relaxation and arousal is achieved, or if it even exists because I'm sure people can have great performances from any number of different arousal to relaxation ratios. I'm extremely lucky because I naturally fall into my (or one of my) groove(s) without trying. It just happens for me. There's no impulsive switch in my head that starts the "getting psyched" process. Which is a shame because I can offer only a little help in this area if I try to speak from personal experience and I assume the hardest part of getting psyched for most people is finding that switch. For me, all I have to do is just look at a race calendar and see the next race date and 'snap!' I start thinking to myself; "Oh boy! Next race is on the 11th! I can't wait! Racing is my favourite thing to do after all!" From then on, all I need to do, I find, is have 'faith' (you can use the word 'confidence' instead of 'faith' if you don't like the fairytale or religious allusions of the 'f' word) that I will continue to have a healthy balance between arousal and relaxation, and I almost always do right up to the start of the race.

For me, being psyched involves getting nervous and excited but not too nervous or excited. I find nerves are very beneficial because they cause my focus on the upcoming event to be clearer, and they also cause me to prepare mentally through visualization more often in the days and hours before the race start. I find that as long as you don't lose too much sleep or your appetite, be as nervous about a race as possible as long as you're comfortable with that feeling in your gut and throat. If I start getting too nervous, I find a good strategy to take my mind off the race is to go for a short run, or stretch – anything to take your mind off the race for a short time. Excitement is vitally important too. Being excited gives you physical energy, which is obviously useful in a ski race. It gets those positive thoughts flowing and it gives you that 'snap' and sharp mindedness that allow you to really go for it! I get myself excited by thinking about all the things I enjoy about racing and oddly enough, by being nervous. The main things I think about to get myself excited are how fun it is to ski blazing fast, or what crafty tactics I'm going to pull off, or how I'm going to release my tremendous skiing ability in a fiery performance of glory! I get chills just thinking about it! Of course you don't want to get in a crazy hormonal rage before a race, you absolutely need to have a relaxed edge when you're getting psyched. This isn't a problem for me because my deepest personality trait is calmness, but I do use some of relaxation scripts from Terry Orlick (a prominent sports psychologists) to calm myself down if I do end up bouncing off the walls.



A perfectly groomed race course, why would you want to be anywhere else? Like really?

In addition to being nervous and excited leading up to a race, it is very important to remain positive and confident in yourself and your abilities. Again, I don't have problems with these aspects because I'm an optimist and I have a very big ego, so I don't really know how to remain positive and confident – it just happens. However, thinking back, there have been times where distractions have reduced my positivity and confidence. What I did was I chose to completely ignore these distractions and it was like they never happened! What a nice segue into a random life lesson I can drop in here: It is always within your power to completely ignore anything you want. You can quote me on that one, but use your newfound power to ignore wisely. Otherwise, I find I can always take solace in the fact that I can make myself happier and more confident by reminding myself that I'm a very talented skier and that I can take pleasure in my skill as a skier. Simple.

I've written about things you should think about, but there are things you should not think about in the time leading up to a race. It's best not to remind ourselves how to mess ourselves up so here's a very short list:

- Don't think about results before or during a race! This is one of the easiest ways to mess with your head. Results-based expectations are harmful so stay away from them. I've had two bad races this season and I'm pretty sure I ruined both of them by being consumed by achieving a certain result. These thoughts cause you to tighten up at crunch-time, I'll talk about that later. Instead, your only expectation for every race should be to ski to your full potential. Ski your race and the results will take care of themselves. That's a fact.
- Don't think thoughts that induce lameness. E.g. negative thoughts. They ruin your vibe.
- Don't worry about things that are beyond your control. Worrying doesn't fix the problem and it's very tiring to worry. Use your incredible ability to ignore stuff in this kind of situation.

Sports psychology is also critically important while the race is actually happening. When I race, I usually end up pretty zoned out – meaning I don't really think about anything. I rarely notice people cheering for me, (but keep cheering for me anyways!) my memory of what happened in a race is usually very spotty afterwards, and time seems to go by very, very fast. However, there are a few things to think about. For example, I write out a list of technical and tactical pointers before every race that are specific to the type of race (sprint, distance, etc...) type of snow conditions, and to the terrain that I will try to remind myself of during the race. Pointers like, 'let the transitions flow on the hills' or 'don't let the other skiers fluster you – ski your own race' are commonly found on my pre-race pointers sheet. I find it is helpful to physically write down these pointers because it helps me internalize them, use them in my visualization and thus I'm more likely to recall them in the heat of the moment.

The most important pointer that is used for every single race nowadays is 'relaxation'. Skiing is a gliding sport, so the more you glide, the more efficient you are and thus the longer you can ski fast. To glide more you have to have, not only good balance, strength, and technique; but you need to RELAX. Every single little thing to big thing you do during a race needs, ABSOLUTELY needs, to be relaxed. Relaxed speed, relaxed power, relaxed technique. Relaxation is so, so, so critical to cross-country ski racing it's insane. I think the ability to relax during a race is the most important skill in cross-country skiing only after aerobic capacity. That's why the thing I think about most is relaxation during a race. I try to let things relax and flow.

A point in time when psychology plays the biggest 'light vs. dark' role is at a time in a race I call 'crunch-time'. Crunch-time is that point in a race where you have to make the decision to push past your mental and physical limits. When crunch-time comes around, when your quads and arms start to burn like crazy, and you can't get enough air, but you have to ski even faster, I think the best strategy in these situations is to embrace the pain and do your best to enjoy it. Remember that though feeling the pain, you know you are having a great race, and you have to make yourself happy and excited about this. You can imagine your happy, positive thoughts pushing the lactate induced pain out of your legs and arms, and things will become more bearable. You can also steadfastly ignore the pain too if you're the tough type, but I've only had limited success with this strategy.

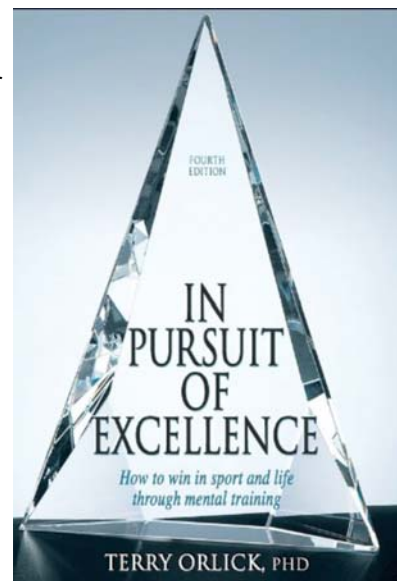
Sometimes things aren't all rosy for whatever reason. Sometimes you'll feel crappy during a race or you'll find you're not motivated to give it your all. If this should happen, take a moment to gather yourself and remind yourself how fun it is to be skiing fast and that if you ski only for yourself - if you ski your own race - things will turn around. It is always possible to salvage a race.

I know people have asked me what I think about before and during a race, so I hope this helps any young skiers out there trying to make the next step. I feel my mental game this ski season has improved tremendously and it is one of the biggest parts of my so far very successful and consistent racing I've done so far this year. At the end of January, I've hit the podium in 7 of my 8 NorAm starts including 4 victories, and was the top Canadian at each race at World Junior Championships – which shows my head must be in the right place. Anyways, writing this out was an exercise in self-discovery, and I hope it was interesting reading to all of you.

Andy Shields

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