



We have all had those special races when we felt great, our running was effortless, and we were totally into the race itself. Such performances happen from time to time and when they do, we savor them, yet often pose the question, “why can’t I run like that in all my races?” It may not be totally realistic to expect fabulous races every time out, but wouldn’t it be great if we could somehow increase the likelihood of peak performances occurring, or in other words, increase the odds of having more great races in the future? Quite possibly, we can increase the likelihood of peak performances by better understanding the mental factors that underlie peak performances.

Much has been written over the past decade concerning peak performance, not just in sport, but in all aspects of life. Peak performance writings can be found in psychological journals, sport psychology texts, eastern religious works and even in business publications. Peak performances occur in many areas of life, yet all peak performances seem to share certain characteristics, whether the peaks occur during artistic painting, gardening or running.

The first characteristic of peak performance is a sense of timelessness, or in other words a lost track of time. If we think back on our best runs we may recall that we ran for an extended period of time, yet it felt as though we were only out for a few minutes. On the other hand, when we are involved in something that doesn’t bring us great pleasure, we may constantly look at the clock and time seems to drag by. Just what accounts for this loss of attention to time during peak performances? Well, it may be due to the second characteristic of peak performance, which is having total focus of attention on the task at hand. When totally concentrated on what we’re doing, external distracters like noise and other people’s voices don’t enter into consciousness. Also, internal distracters, such as negative self-talk, lack of confidence and self-doubt don’t interfere with what we are doing in the moment.

In running we can actually improve our ability to lose track of time and concentrate by working on it during training runs. A key skill to improve is the ability to stay in the present and focus on just what we are doing in the present moment. Many psychologists today call this concept “mindfulness”. Too often we are worrying about things that might happen in the future or are ruminating about things that have happened in the past. Future or past tense thinking tends to result in strong emotional reactions that take our focus away from the present. So during training, we need to work to free our minds of the past and future and just get into what we’re doing in the present moment. By doing so our concentration will improve and time will just slip away.

Also, when we concentrate in the present, not only do we lose track of time, but we also lose track of the self. In other words, we get so involved and focused on what we’re doing, that we totally forget about the self-concept and we are simply one with the activity we are doing at the time. In running that means we are so into the actual running that we really don’t think about ourselves. Focusing in the moment means there is no distinction between the body and running, it’s simply one. Many people can’t even recall a lot about what actually occurred during peak performance because they were so engrossed in the performance itself. Time is lost and self is lost, all due to being totally focused on the task at hand and in the present. So by working on “mindfulness” during training, there is a greater likelihood that it will transfer into races, thereby increasing the likelihood of peak performance.

Having optimal levels of physiological arousal also appears to be a characteristic of peak performance states. What this really means is that we don’t want to be too nervous, but there is a certain level of heightened anxiety that is necessary to perform well. The optimal level of arousal will be different for everyone; the key is to learn to understand just where that optimal level is. If we think back to our best races and try to recall how nervous we felt before and during the race, we can use it as tool to improve future performance. Work on finding an optimal zone of arousal, or nervousness, and then try to get into that zone for races. Again, it will be different for everyone, but some feelings of anxiety are not detrimental and may actually be a sign of a peak performance getting ready to happen. Many people describe it as having a sense of calm, yet a sense of excitement as well. It’s energy that is focused, which allows for feelings of being effortless and in total control.

Of course confidence and motivation are also characteristics of peak performance. To have great performances there must be high levels of motivation, or in other words, we really have to want be out running and running well. Usually motivation isn’t a problem on race day, but sometimes confidence is. Lack of confidence is really self-doubt, which leads to negative self-talk and a lack of focus, both of which can hinder the chances of peak performance occurring. Confidence is really a choice that we all make. If we have trained hard and done our best preparing for a race then why not choose to be confident? What more could be done? Just

trust, believe in the training and go out and allow a good race to happen. We don't need to get in our own way by being negative with ourselves and not being confident. Just think about the passion that is felt for running and the hard work that has been done. Then be at ease, focus on what needs to be done and just let the race happen. None of us should allow a lack of confidence to stand in the way of a great performance.

While peak performance states can never be guaranteed, we can all work to cultivate the factors that can enhance the likelihood of peak performance occurring. By being more mindful and learning to focus more in the present and just getting lost in the act of running, we are more likely to experience peak performance. Learn how to find the optimal state of arousal and work to get there before every race. Be confident in ourselves and our training because not trusting ourselves or our training will only decrease the chance of peak performance. Our next race is true opportunity for a peak performance state to occur. Just let it happen!

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