

The mental side of racing ultras by Stephen Brown

1. **What I'm trying to achieve;** my mental state is like a Sine wave and I know that the higher the high points are, the lower the low points will be. Therefore, I'm trying to keep my mental state as close to neutral as I can. I don't want too much adrenalin or too much cortisol; I don't want too much excitement or too many nerves; I don't want too much happiness or too much stress. In a long race, I don't want to be 'too positive', because I know at some point – while I'm still racing – I'll have to pay the price of becoming 'too negative'. One is always the reverse of the other. My aim is to stay somewhere between neutral and slightly positive at all times.
2. **Mantras:** I often have a 'slightly positive' race mantra that sets out my goals and keeps me focussed. For example, 'Calm even breathing and a smile on my face'. I repeat that in my head to the rhythm of my steps/breaths and it serves to keep me just on the positive side of neutral.
3. **Meta-thinking:** If I'm not naturally in a 'neutral'-ish place then I will 'think about my thinking'. I picture myself stepping outside of my body, looking at me and discussing what I'm thinking about. 'That's interesting, Brownny's beginning to feel a bit down/anxious/hyper. I wonder what's causing that to happen ...' This distances me from the feeling/emotion and get's me to start to deal with it, and bring myself back to a more neutral place ...
4. **Addressing things:** 'I wonder what's causing that to happen ...' I'll then start running through a few mental drills: am I tired (what do I need to do about that); am I hungry/thirsty; am I in pain/discomfort; am I stressed. If I can identify something, then I will address it straightaway.
5. **Distraction techniques:** if there is no obvious issue to address, then I will try a distraction technique to bring me back into a more neutral place. 'Okay, so Brownny's feeling a bit stressed and there's nothing obvious that's causing it. That's alright, it's natural to feel a bit stressed at times in a race like this. Let's think about ...' ... the distraction techniques that have worked for me are:
 - a. **Breaking down targets and doing mental maths:** '... let's think about the next CP; it's 10 miles away; at my current pace that should take me 4 hours; half way to that is 5 miles; half way to that is 2.5 miles; half way to that is 1.25 miles; I can cover that in 30 minutes, let's set a challenge of ... etc etc.'
 - b. **Looking up and making guesstimates:** '... let's think about that tree-line up ahead. I reckon that's ½ a mile away; that should take me 12 minutes; I'll not look at my watch again until I get there and I'll see how close I was' ...
 - c. **Lists:** '... let's think about the best Northern Ireland first XI in my lifetime?' 'what's the best all-Ireland first XI' 'what's the best Arsenal first XI comprised only of black/white/British/French players' [A Spurs fan, could try 'Apart from Pat Jennings and Sol Campbell, has there ever been a Spurs player fit to wear an Arsenal shirt?']. Top 10 albums.
 - d. **Plans:** 'let's think about which countries I'd like to visit over the next 10 years'. NB with plans I try to think about something vague and fun. If I start thinking about plans to get my roof sorted out, that is likely to lead to stress ...

The aim of any of these distraction techniques is just to get my head back into a relatively neutral place by taking my mind into a 'safe/bland' space. I want my mind to 'wander'. John Kynaston told me about an Australian runner whose theory is when you get into a really negative place (bonking) you can't switch straight into a really positive place; you have to get into a neutral place first. My adaptation of that theory is I try never to leave a neutral place.

6. **Music:** I don't listen to anything when I'm running for a variety of reasons. One reason is that most of the music I have would produce too strong an emotional reaction (elation; excitement; adrenalin; remind me of a good time or a bad time etc.). If I was going to listen to anything at all it would be fairly bland music or, more likely, the radio so that someone else is making the choices and I have no personal connection to the music. Or radio 5 so that listening to other people talk becomes a distraction.
7. **Physical posture etc:** as part of the meta-thinking (see above), I'll look at my physical posture and make myself stand more upright; shoulders back; chin up; head high; smile. All of these things can make me feel slightly better.
8. **When a thought occurs, deal with it:** this is one of my absolute rules that minimises stress and stops bad decision making. As soon as I think 'I'm cold, I wonder if I should ...' I'll stop and put extra layers on (or zip up or whatever I need to do); 'I need the toilet' ... I'll stop; 'my heel's beginning to rub...' stop and sort it out.
9. **Be kind to your future self:** this is one of my race mantras. If I'm taking my coat off then I'll take time to turn the sleeves the right way round; I'll spend 30 minutes, if needed, to put my drop bag back in the right order. The idea is that my current self may be tired, grumpy and in a hurry, but my future self (who has to put my coat back on again; or has to go back into my drop bag and find spare batteries) will be even more tired, grumpy and in more of a hurry. Therefore, taking the time 'now' is being kind to my future self.
10. **Finally ... "Mental strength is a continuous series of decisions not to give up".**

From the start of the race, till the end, as long as I keep on making one decision after another not to give up, I will avoid a DNF. It sounds simple, but of course one single decision to quit, undoes all the previous decisions to carry on. (I know I could get injured or timed out, but I am just focussing on the mental side of racing). My job is to ensure that the immediate context in which I make each of the decisions, is as easy as possible. If I am making the decision about whether to carry on/give up in a context where I am tired and/or hungry and/or in pain and/or stressed then I am making it more difficult to make the positive decision and much easier to make the negative decision. The 4 drills I run through my head all the time are:

- a. **Tiredness/exhaustion:** am I sleepy? Am I working too hard? What do I need to do to address it?
- b. **Hunger/hydration:** do I need to address these?
- c. **Pain/discomfort:** is anything hurting? rubbing?
- d. **Stress:** am I worrying about anything that I can address? (Am I worrying about whether the batteries in my headtorch are going to last? Yes? Sort it out).

If I can stay on top of those 4 different things, then I am making the context for my next decision about whether I am carry on, easier. I am less likely to quit.

Stephen Brown