

What Mental Skills Ironman Triathletes Need and Want

Karine **Grand'Maison**, Canada

Karine Grand'Maison, LL.B, LL.L, is currently finishing her master's degree in Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa under the supervision of Terry Orlick. For her thesis, she examines the psychological skills and mental preparation strategies used by top Ironman triathletes. Karine is a competitive triathlete, is training for her second Ironman triathlon, and has an interest in working with elite athletes and provides mental training tips to triathletes and other endurance athletes at <http://www.imahead.com>

Abstract

Ultra endurance triathlon is a very demanding sport that is increasingly popular among amateur athletes. With the help of an online tool, the author surveyed several triathletes in the Ottawa region, known for its large community of multi-sport athletes. This article presents the sport of Ironman triathlon and discusses what triathletes' motivations to train and to compete are, as well as the challenges, fears and needs they are facing. Although two thirds of the respondents reported that their knowledge of sport psychology was limited or inexistent, 97% of triathletes said they believed *strongly* or *very strongly* that mental skills were key to success. Moreover, the survey revealed two deep-rooted myths with respect to the use of sport psychology. Ironman triathletes' issues clearly reflect what a lot of performers want and what sport psychology consultants should be providing—practical and effective guidelines that work in the real world of performance.

Triathlon is an exciting and relatively new sport that came to life 25 years ago in Hawaii. The legend alleges that in the midst of an argument concerning who was in better shape, swimmers, runners or cyclists, John Collins had the somewhat novel idea of solving the matter by putting together the Waikiki Rough Water Swim, the Round the Island Bike race and the Honolulu Marathon, all in one single race. It was at that moment that the Ironman[®] triathlon (or ultra endurance triathlon), an ultimate test of human physical and mental capabilities, was born (IronmanLive, 2004).

Do you have a friend who is a triathlete? If so, chances are she is an open and sociable person, who enjoys the camaraderie experi-

enced with fellow triathletes. She likely thrives on being able to try new things, but needs discipline and structure to maximize her chances of success. Chances also are that your friend is single-minded in her approach to challenges and in her pursuit of success, and that she sets high goals for herself. It seems that "triathlon appeals to people who are passionate, obsessed, focused, compulsive and ambitious [...] and who understand that [they] can achieve anything [they] put [their] mind to with consistent determination" (LA TriClub, 2001).

Triathlon is the perfect venue to allow athletes to push their limits, physically and mentally. The Ironman triathlon, the longest form of triathlon, is a three-discipline event

consisting of a 3.8-km swim, a 180-km cycle, followed by a 42.2-km marathon run. The race preparation of ultra endurance triathletes is demanding and time consuming. Their weekly training schedule will typically include at least 12 km of swimming, 370 km of cycling and 70 km of running, totalling an average of over 20 hours of physical training alone (O'Toole, Douglas & Hiller, 1989). The race itself is an extremely intense challenge taking from 8 to 17 hours to complete. The excessive level of strenuous physical exertion required of the triathletes during races can lead to several medical problems such as dehydration and heat exhaustion, often complicated by hyponatremia (Hiller et al., 1987). This gruelling event pushes the limits of human endurance and consequently demands considerable mental toughness simply to complete the distance (Schofield, Dickson, Mummery, & Street, 2002).

A minimum of level "mental toughness" is required to complete the event and a high level of mental toughness is needed to race in demanding events of such length and duration. The mental aspect of this sport is a key to success. How can we help Ironman triathletes reach the goals they are pursuing? How can we guide them to train their minds to help their bodies perform to their capacity?

Survey of Ironman triathletes

I designed a practical survey to look at triathletes' motivations to train and compete, to assess what they liked best about their sport, and to explore the issues, fears and challenges they faced while training for and competing in Ironman triathlons. I also inquired about their knowledge of the field of sport psychology and their use (or not) of mental training consulting services. The final question asked them what their view on the importance of mental training to improve their performance was, and what they would

be interested in learning if they had access to sport psychology resources.

The survey was launched in June 2004 in the Ottawa region (for our international readers, Ottawa is the capital of Canada, where the cold winters make it is nearly impossible to run outside for two months of the year, to bike outside for four months, and to swim outside for at least half the year; not your perfect temperatures for triathlon training!). I posted a link to my web-based triathlon survey in Tri-Rudy, a regional daily newsletter which has over 3000 subscribers. What came out of this survey was very informative. The background information on the Ironman participants who responded is the following: forty Ironman triathletes, 55% male and 45% female, completed the survey; 42% have been training for triathlons for three to five years, whereas 28% seasoned athletes had done so for more than a decade; about two thirds (70%) had participated in one to three Ironman, the other third having completed four or more of these harsh competitions. Now, what is it exactly that brought them to be Ironman triathletes?

Motivations to train and compete

What motivates these individuals to train for and compete in triathlon in spite of claims that it is "not a safe leisurely activity to promote good health, rather it is a test of human endurance which pushes the mind and body to dangerous extremes of exhaustion" (Hosch, 1994)? Ironman triathletes need to be highly motivated in order to train for 10 to 25 hours each week despite an already busy schedule. I asked them what their MAIN motivation to train was; most (27%) answered it was to **push their limits and continually improve both their physical and mental conditions**. They said they train "to see what this body of mine can do!", "to challenge my body always more", "to prove to myself that I have the determination". A

close second reason for training (22%) was to **enjoy an active lifestyle**. The lifestyle they feel they live is one of being "fit", "healthy", "balanced" and one that can involve training with other members of a group. Some athletes mentioned that training for triathlon allowed them to "keep focused in other aspects of life" (other than just work). Connected to the idea of lifestyle, the third main reason for training (16%) of the Ironman triathletes, was to **achieve fitness and physical and mental well-being**. Additional noteworthy reasons for training included the feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment they derive from their training, the goal of racing well at an Ironman triathlon, the fun they have to do the training, and the desire to "delay old age".

Ironman triathletes need to be highly motivated in order to compete in Ironman triathlons and push their bodies to the limit continuously for several hours. What motivates them to do so? Three main themes emerged from an analysis of their answers. Not surprisingly, the number one reason given by Ironman triathletes is that they **thrive on the challenge** the sport offers them (38%). This *challenge* existed on different personal levels, ranging from "seeing if I could finish one" to "seeing how my body deals with racing and speed". Here are four answers that represent different facets of challenge: "To be as good as I can be", "it's a huge physical and emotional challenge", "motivation to see how I perform under pressure", and "a chance to prove that I can go beyond my limits".

The number two reason triathletes identified as their main motivation to compete in races was to **achieve goals and witness progress** (30%), shown by quotes such as "self-improvement" and "achievement of a difficult goal". The number three reason to race was **feeling a sense of accomplishment** (19%), ranging from "Seeing the benefits of train-

ing" to the "satisfaction of completing [an Ironman]".

To broaden the picture of the reasons to train and compete, respondents were then asked what they liked best about training and racing. Interestingly enough, the answers to this question are fairly different from the main motivations mentioned above. On one hand, Ironman triathletes enjoy their training mostly because it is **fun**, they get to meet with like-minded **friends**, it keeps them **fit**, and because they spend time **outdoors**. On the other hand, what they like best about racing is the excitement of the day and of finishing something big, the sense of community among the participants, and the volunteers and family support. Only three athletes mentioned they enjoyed pushing their limits in racing; is it possible that when race day actually comes, the "immensity of the challenge" suddenly loses its motivational purpose? What, then, does it transform into? The one thing we know for sure is that whatever the level of motivation Ironman triathletes have towards accomplishing their objectives, several things can get in the way of their reaching their goals on race day.

Issues and challenges

If you had to guess what the single most important issue triathletes are struggling with when *training* for an Ironman, what would you say it is? It's too tough? Nah... It's too expensive? Nah! Here's a little hint: the amount of training that people, who have other normal life demands, put in to be a competitive (yet amateur) triathlete is extensive. It has been documented that most short-course triathletes (who competed in triathlons whose length is about four times shorter than the Ironman) trained at least five days a week for about two hours a day—not counting commuting to the training venue, weight training, maintenance of

equipment, reading about triathlon, etc. (Hosch, 1994).

Time management was mentioned by half the respondents as being their major challenge. For many, balancing work, family life, time with friends and training represents an incredible challenge. They work full-time, and then have to find a way to plan their training, schedule baby sitting, spend time with their spouse and get adequate rest in-between. This often results in what one triathlete termed the "social cost of Ironman training", and sometimes makes it hard to maintain perspective. Here are two quotes that illustrate the issue of time crunch faced by Ironman triathletes: the biggest challenge is "being balanced and prepared – this means you have to put an effort in your preparation of all areas – swimming, biking, running, flexibility, strength, mental preparation, nutrition – and then still fit in a job and a family"; the most difficult thing is to find "time to balance the training with other commitments especially spending time with friends and family (and be awake ;)".

Many other factors were repeatedly mentioned by triathletes as preventing them from training at a consistently high level. The three most commonly cited included, **getting injured, having difficulty determining the adequate amount and intensity of training, and sustaining the initially high motivation throughout the several long training sessions**. A final interesting challenge was to deal with the physical and mental **fatigue**: "there were times when it seemed overwhelming".

All this preparation, hard work, dedication, and commitment are supposed to pay at some point later down the road, but there seems to be additional obstacles one has to overcome before she can 'have the best race ever'. The most prevalent concern for Iron-

man triathletes on race day is commonly referred to as "**not having a good day**" (30%) and therefore not performing like they have in training or like they are capable of doing. Whether it's "not feeling good on race day", "not being able to finish" or "not doing well", these worries often surface before competitions. The second stressful concern for many triathletes is **the swimming leg and its mass start** (22%). Indeed, this moment can be pretty hectic with close to 2000 triathletes hitting the water at the same time, often in choppy conditions, and trying to establish their own space to complete the 3.8-km swim. Ironman triathletes were rather blunt in their description of their swim-related fears: "drowning...", "surviving the swim ;" or "too many overzealous competitors that will knock you silly in the swim to gain a meter".

The third concern triathletes worry a lot about is the issue of **proper nutrition and hydration** (19%). Obviously, in an ultra-endurance event lasting of a minimum of ten hours for the majority of competitors, having adequate hydration and taking in enough calories to sustain the hard and long-lasting efforts are key but difficult. Indeed, one's body cannot handle and digest more than a limited amount of calories in a given time but not taking enough fuel in will lead to the dreaded point where one "hits the wall", i.e. when the glycogen reserves are completely depleted and the triathlete just cannot sustain the pace any longer (and usually must walk the rest of the distance).

Finally, not far behind, the fourth most cited fear about Ironman racing is having **mechanical problems on the bike** (16%), which includes "mechanical failures which could put you out of the race" and "worrying about things going wrong such as a flat tire". Triathletes mentioned mechanical breakdown as a huge concern they have about

race day; yet, it seems that only so much can be done in terms of maintenance to prevent this kind of problems. In every race, many things can happen that are out of one's control and that can prevent one from performing to her potential. On this topic, it is interesting to note that in addition to being very committed individuals, triathletes generally have a high *need for control*. According to Hilliard (1988), triathlon can provide this sense of control because athletes feel that the outcome of their race is almost entirely contingent on their own performance.

Ironman triathletes could move a long way in the direction of feeling more relaxed and confident about an upcoming race if they learned to simply put worries of this kind aside and rather focus on more positive aspects of the process. This links nicely with the comments of one triathlete who discussed why she was satisfied of the sport psychology services she had received: Finally, "I could let go of things I cannot control". This is a crucial skill for anyone who wants to go into a challenging event with confidence and focus.

Knowledge, use, and perceived importance of sport psychology

Triathletes were asked seven questions about their level of knowledge and use of sport psychology skills. Many of these triathletes said that they were not very familiar with sport psychology (i.e. what it is, what it's for, who uses it). 26% percent said their knowledge in this area was *poor*, 43% said it was *fair* and only 29% said it was good. Only one triathlete said her knowledge of sport psychology was excellent. Very similar percentages were obtained when asked about their knowledge of the various mental skills one can use in a race. However, when asked the question "How important do you believe that mental skills are in Ironman training and racing?", 97% said they

believed *strongly* or *very strongly* that they were key to success! Obviously, these triathletes believe they would benefit from receiving more education on this topic. Thus, the challenge faced by the sport psychology profession is to make applied and relevant mental training skills easily accessible to amateur athletes.

When triathletes were asked to list the mental skills they were familiar with or knew about, only 33 athletes out of 40 answered this question (7 athletes could not list one mental skill). Out of the 33 who responded, 26 named visualization as the most known form of mental training. Next was positive self-talk, with 11 responses, and relaxation techniques mentioned by 8 respondents. Four athletes answered that they knew of no mental skill, or that they had no idea what I was referring to.

This limited knowledge of the mental skills contradicts triathletes' strong belief that mental training is an essential part of achieving excellence. The positive side of the story is that those triathletes who *did* know about mental skills were applying them. 26% of these triathletes said they practiced some form of sport psychology **often for races**, and 37% practiced it **often in training**. Only 22% said they never or rarely practice any form of sport psychology, and 14% said they used it **all the time!** This is at least a very encouraging start.

As for sport psychology consulting services, it comes as no surprise that 88% of the triathletes surveyed had never used them. Those who had worked with sport psychologists or mental skills trainers were generally satisfied with the services they received. Ironman triathletes who had never use mental training consulting services cited three main reasons refraining them to do so. The most commonly cited reason identified by 37% was that they **just didn't have the opportunity to do so** (for example, they had

never thought of it, or they didn't know that this was a service available to them, or they were unsure of what it was). 33% cited a lack of **money and time** for not engaging in a mental training program, and the last 30% held the **view that the emphasis should be put on physical training**.

Two long-standing myths, which surfaced when reviewing answers to the survey, need to be addressed by the sport psychology profession: 1) mental training takes time, which I don't have in surplus; and 2) I don't really need it because I'm not at a high level. Hopefully, as more and more athletes become aware of the immense benefits of sport psychology at a young age, it will become a normal part of an athlete's training.

Once athletes make the necessary effort to invest mental energy in deciding how to channel it wisely and effectively, it will begin to pay dividends. It is like hiring a financial consultant to advise us on how to spend wisely; this will save lots of money in the long term. Triathletes who engage in effective mental training programs will discover that practicing mental skills doesn't take much additional time; on the contrary, it will help one save time—and eventually perform better—through a more focused concentration and the use of distraction control skills.

What Ironman triathletes want (or need)?

This brings us to perhaps the two most important questions in the survey: what is it that Ironman triathletes really want to know or learn about with respect to sport psychology/ their mental preparation? The first open-ended question was, "Please tell me which TOPICS you would like to be discussed in articles for triathletes", and the second question was, "If you had the chance to ask any question to a sport psychology consultant, what would you REALLY want

to know?". Answers on these two questions recouped in many respects, so they will be discussed together in the following section.

What Ironman triathletes wanted to know can be categorized in three main themes: 1) improve race performance and consistency; 2) improve training; and 3) sustain a high level of motivation. Firstly, athletes want to learn or improve methods/techniques that will help them **improve their racing performance and consistency** (including race visualization, pre-race routines, pre-race anxiety control, and learning how to 'dig deep' in the later stages of the triathlon when the body starts to fall apart. The main thing they were interested in was how to improve their racing skills.

Focus was repeatedly mentioned under various forms: "how to stay focused during a long event... I day dream a lot" ; "how to push while running when the body says 'No' and the mind says 'Just a little bit further'"; "What to do when things aren't going well"; "Mentally, what to do during the race when your head is saying 'STOP this foolishness!'". Very typical of committed performers, triathletes want success *now*: "I want to know tips I can implement rapidly to improve my performance without having to practice them for five years before they're effective." This last quote reflects what a lot of performers want and what sport psychology consultants should be providing—practical, effective guidelines that work in the real world of performance (Orlick, 2000).

The second main theme which triathletes want to learn more about is **improving their training** (including "how to stay focused during the long training grind up to race day" or "what makes someone passionate one day, and apathetic the next, and how do you regulate this?"). It seems that two sepa-

rate areas would be particularly helpful for triathletes in regards of the training they have to do. The first refers to **sustaining motivation to train for such a high volume over extended periods of time**.

Triathletes want to know how to "keep yourself motivated during the off-season", "things to use in training on hard days to keep motivation", or simply put, "How do I stay focused in my training when all I really want to do is sit on the couch and relax?" Another important training-related area is **coping with and overcoming injuries**: "How do I re-adjust plans when injuries strike?" or "How do you handle the 'blues' when you get injured?" Overuse injuries are common among Ironman triathletes (O'Toole, Douglas & Hiller, 1989), and getting sick or injured is sometimes more of a challenge for the mind than it is for the body.

The third main theme triathletes want to learn more about is **staying positive for both training and races**. References were made to top Ironman triathletes who emphasized the importance of having a positive outlook on the training and during race day, and this message seems to have reached many triathletes. Being positive is a crucial ingredient for successful training and performance, and athletes are keen to learn more on this topic: "positive self-talk", "staying positive", "problem solving", as well as "a few good jokes for a good laugh".

Other topics raised by the respondents included issues of *confidence* ("I have a lot of self doubts"), *goal-setting* ("setting goals and sticking to them—Ironman preparation is long"), and *constructive evaluations* ("how to narrow down race problems when reflecting on a performance"). Many triathletes also want to "see a synopsis of the techniques used by *Top Elite level Ironman*

competitors". In summary, what triathletes want know is 1) how to keep motivated and focused during their long training sessions; 2) how to focus better during races to improve the level and consistency of their performances; and 3) how to become more positive and confident in their sport pursuit.

Interestingly, while almost all triathletes mentioned that the number one challenge in training for Ironman triathlon was **balancing sport with life**, only one quick mention of this issue was found in over 150 answers. Perhaps this was an oversight, perhaps not. As the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink...

Providing the right resources

Even though few Ironman triathletes had sufficient knowledge about sport psychology, most were thirsty for more information. When asked if they would visit a website giving information on Mental Training for triathlon, 86% said were clearly interested. Triathletes are generally competitive people, and "they're willing to go to extremes to gain an edge in the competition", spending an average of \$3,200 (U.S.) per year on multi-sport purchases (LA TriClub, 2001; The Sacramento Bee, 2004). But after buying the most expensive swimming and biking equipment, and training as much as their schedule, or body, will handle, where will they *get that extra edge*? An obvious answer is mental training. It seems that mental training is becoming the new place to turn to for further improvement of one's performances.

Athletes need relevant and applied resources. With spare time and money being two of the most sacred assets of Ironman triathletes, sport psychology resources need to be very easy to access and tailored to their specific needs in order to reach large numbers of athletes. To help Ironman triathletes

push their limits even further, we have to provide them with access to quality mental training adapted to their individual aspirations, needs, and challenges.

The Ironman Triathletes' Website on Mental

Training I recently developed is therefore my own challenge. You are welcome to visit the website and offer your comments. <http://www.imahead.com>

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