

## **Focusing For Excellence: Lessons From Elite Mountain Bike Racers**

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### **Abstract**

Studies have shown the importance of focusing skills at the elite performance level. For example, Orlick and Partington (1988) found that attentional focus was one of the two most important skills related to high level performance at the Olympic Games. However there has been minimal research investigating how performers perceive focus, how they develop and refine focus and what kinds of focusing skills they use to eliminate distractions.

Ten of Canada's top ranked pro-elite men and women mountain bike racers, all with extensive international-level experience, were interviewed for the present. Their insights advanced our knowledge with respect to how elite athletes perceive, define and direct their focus. For example, to prepare an optimal focus for racing, athletes talked about how they planned ahead of time how they would focus for different points of the race. Through racing and reflection the athletes learned what focusing techniques helped them to stay positive and focused in all sorts of different race situations such as a bad start, a crash, a mechanical problem, and weather conditions such as muddy or dry, cold or hot. The findings present a clearer picture of how focus is developed over the course of an athlete's career. Discovering the best focus was also about athletes finding the best balance within their lives. Detailed athlete quotes and recommendations for improving focus are provided. These findings may assist athletes, coaches and mental training consultants to prepare more effectively to attain and maintain a great focus, especially in the sport of mountain biking.

## Introduction

In sport, as well as other domains, the ability to focus is one of the most important skills effecting personal and performance excellence (Orlick, 1998). Focusing skills are essential for success at the elite level in sport where the challenges are great and the demands are high. Poor performances are often a result of an inability to deal with distractions, a lack of consistent focus on the task at hand or failure to connect with the most essential features of the performance (Orlick, & Partington, 1988; Orlick, 2000).

Orlick (1996), refers to focusing as :

*the ability to concentrate totally on what you are doing, seeing, reading, hearing, feeling, observing or experiencing while you are engaged in the activity or the performance. Focusing fully not only allows you to connect totally with what you are experiencing, but also frees you to perform without being disturbed by distracting thoughts. (p. 8)*

Studies have shown that elite athletes are more successful at focusing than their non-elite counterparts both before and during a performance (Defrancesco & Burke, 1997; Mahoney, Gabriel, & Perkins, 1987), and that they have a greater capacity to regain focus following distraction in comparison to non-elite athletes (Thomas & Over, 1994).

There has been minimal research investigating how athletes themselves define focus, how they develop focus, how they get focused and stay focused. What techniques do athletes use to successfully gain, guide or shift their focus? Does their focus change over the course of their career?

The current study involved a group of elite mountain bike racers competing at a professional level. The sport of mountain biking was chosen because it is a highly demanding

sport, which has undergone no previous research in relation to mental skills. The First World Mountain Bike Championship was held in 1986, and it became an Olympic Sport for the first time in 1996. Mountain biking is a complex, high intensity sport which requires effective focusing skills for constantly changing up and down terrain (often at altitude) over rocks and logs, through trees, sand, and mud. It is a risk-endurance sport, with unique physical, technical, and logistical demands. An average elite-level mountain bike race is two to two and half hours long, therefore requiring a prolonged focus. Due to the demanding technical terrain, there is also an element of risk and/or fear in the sport of mountain biking with the potential for serious injury or death.

By exploring the way in which elite-level mountain bikers apply mental focus to their training and competition it was felt that meaningful insights might be gained that may be applicable to other sport and life domains.

## Method

Given the advantages and flexibility of the open-ended interview, a qualitative method of inquiry and analysis was used in this study. A dialogue with these elite athletes created an opportunity to discuss how they perceive focus and how they have developed and utilized focusing skills for both training and competition

## Study Participants

Ten of Canada's top ten Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) ranked pro-elite men and women mountain bike racers, all with extensive international-level experience, were invited to participate in the present study. All the athletes were National team members with several years of experience at the international level including World Cup and

World Championship races. Four of the athletes were also Olympians.

Table 1 Athlete Profiles

| Athlete | Age<br>(Dec. 2000) | Years of Mtb<br>Racing<br>Experience | Highest<br>Ever World<br>Cup Finish | Highest Ever<br>World Champ<br>Finish | Olympic<br>Experience   | UCI Ranking<br>(End of 2000<br>Season) |
|---------|--------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| 1       | 26                 | 15 (10 road)                         | 4 <sup>th</sup>                     | 2 <sup>nd</sup>                       | 14 <sup>th</sup> (2000) | 9                                      |
| 2       | 27                 | 13                                   | 10 <sup>th</sup>                    | 28 <sup>th</sup>                      | -                       | 47                                     |
| 3       | 26                 | 9                                    | 25 <sup>th</sup>                    | 38 <sup>th</sup>                      | -                       | 28                                     |
| 4       | 24                 | 9                                    | 15 <sup>th</sup>                    | 14 <sup>th</sup>                      | -                       | 46                                     |
| 5       | 31                 | 10                                   | 11 <sup>th</sup>                    | 17 <sup>th</sup>                      | -                       | 20                                     |
| 6       | 24                 | 10                                   | 6 <sup>th</sup>                     | 20 <sup>th</sup>                      | -                       | 38                                     |
| 7       | 30                 | 12                                   | 13 <sup>th</sup>                    | 13 <sup>th</sup>                      | 29 <sup>th</sup> (1996) | 37                                     |
| 8       | 34                 | 9                                    | 7 <sup>th</sup>                     | 7 <sup>th</sup>                       | 8 <sup>th</sup> (2000)  | 9                                      |
| 9       | 28                 | 15 (11 road)                         | 22 <sup>nd</sup>                    | 33 <sup>rd</sup>                      | -                       | 55                                     |
| 10      | 23                 | 8                                    | 8 <sup>th</sup>                     | 22 <sup>nd</sup>                      | 9 <sup>th</sup> (2000)  | 18                                     |

Note. mtb – mountain bike, road – road racing only

### Procedure

These high performance athletes were interviewed at a place and time of their convenience during the 2000 competitive season. Initial contact was made with twelve athletes by e-mail. The objectives of the study were explained and the athletes were informed that the interview would take no more than 90 minutes of their time. Four possible dates were suggested surrounding different races they would attend. Ten of the athletes contacted were interviewed. One athlete did not respond at all, and another declined for being too busy.

A semi-structured, open-ended interview was conducted with each athlete. All interviews were audiotape recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to produce texts which were analyzed. To ensure the accuracy of all data collected, a printed copy of the interview transcript was sent to each athlete. The athletes were asked to verify that their thoughts were accurately represented in the texts, and to make

additions, deletions or changes to the text if they were warranted.

### Results

#### Defining Focus

The athletes were first asked to define what focus is for them. After carefully reading and analyzing each athlete's responses, five main components of focus emerged.

- 1) 100% Concentration - An ability to concentrate fully on the job at hand and what you have to do in order to reach your objective.

Focus is being able to “concentrate on the one thing you're trying to do 100%” (Athlete 10).

“I am concentrating and all my efforts are aimed toward my racing or a goal that I have” (Athlete 7).

Attaining full focus or 100% concentration appears to be contingent upon, or linked to, the 4 factors listed below.

2) Eliminating Distractions (No Distractions)

In order to continually pursue a high level goal and keep the focus that is needed, athletes felt that distractions must be eliminated. Focus involves “eliminating any possible external discomforts or pests” (Athlete 8). It involves not letting other concerns become too overwhelming, “Focus is trying to eliminate a lot of the outside stress like not letting something like media attention get to you” (Athlete 3).

3) Planning and Preparing to be your best (Plan)

*To achieve an objective within a certain time frame, athletes felt there needs to be a plan for each step along the way, a “focus on what you have to do in order to get there, the job ahead” (Athlete 1). In order to be able to focus for any task, a certain amount of preparation is needed beforehand. An individual needs to take care of him or herself mentally as well as taking care of logistical concerns, or equipment concerns in order to be prepared to focus fully when the time comes to perform. “The best focus for me is just knowing that I’ve done everything that I have to do to be prepared” (Athlete 4). “If you’re focusing for an upcoming mountain bike race you try to get your rest, you try to eat well, try to check out the course and work on any difficulties you are having with the course” (Athlete 9).*

4) Having a vision of where you want to go (Vision)

Athletes felt it was important to have a vision of where you want to go and to focus on successive goals that will get you there. Focusing in this sense is “the ability to look ahead and see where you want to go” (Athlete 1). Or as athlete 4 said, focus is “defining a specific objective”.

5) Persisting with a specific objective (Perseverance).

Athletes felt that persistence is a big part of a full and effective focus. Once an objective is set, focused persistence or a persistent focus is a necessary part of continuing to go after the goal through all possible setbacks and disappointments along the way. Focus is “how you keep a specific objective” (Athlete 4).

The interview excerpt below provides an example of some of the different dimensions of focus mentioned by one Olympic athlete.

*I think focus is being able to block out everything external (**No Distractions**) and just concentrate on the one thing you’re trying to do 100% (**100% Concentration**). For racing, focus is being able to have everything set up so you can just think about the race (**Plan and Prepare**). Everything else is just what you’ve planned out beforehand so it’s just routine, your food, your travel, so you don’t have any other stresses (**No Distractions, Plan**). So you can just concentrate on riding (**100% Concentration**) and you don’t have to worry about external things like your bike and stuff (**No Distractions**). You can think about actually riding in the race (**100% Concentration**). I think being prepared is a big part of it, for me it is (Athlete 10).*

In addition to 100% concentration, elimination of distractions and preparing through planning, athletes in this study shed light on

two new dimensions of focus, those being vision and perseverance. Having a vision of what you want to do or where you want to go was felt to be an important element of sustained focus and overall performance. Vision provides the long-term focus or reason for persisting through obstacles and distractions. Creating and following a race or competition plan is the short-term focus for executing the performance. Embracing a vision or dream of what you want to be or become appears to be key to the long-term aspect of focus. It gives you a reason for “hanging in there” and “sticking to it”. Keeping that vision fresh in your mind was believed to be necessary to maintain the focus and perseverance required to reach the long-term vision or goal.

#### **Best Focus versus Worst Focus– Factors**

After the athletes shared their perspectives on focus, each athlete was asked to describe a race at which they felt they had their best focus. They described the events prior to the race which led to their best focus, as well as what transpired during the race to facilitate their best focus. Leading up to the race the athletes talked about focusing on staying relaxed, positive self-talk and positive thinking, as well as visualizing the course, including their desired feeling and strategies for the race. Good logistical planning and preparation, including knowing where and with whom they would be staying, and preparing their bike were some key factors that led to the best focus. Once the race was underway, the athletes spoke of the how their focus changes for different sections of the race. For example they spoke about how their focus shifts between their position in the race, their own pace and internal feelings, and self-reminders for how to ride certain technical sections. Feeling good physically before and during the race also helped facilitate good focus.

After describing a race at which they felt they had their best focus, each athlete was asked to give an example of the opposite, a race without good focus. Many of the factors that led to a race with poor focus were opposite to the factors that led to a race with good focus (see Table 3). For example, there was poor preparation and planning leading up to the race. Uncontrollable factors and distractions before the race led to poor focus, as well as not feeling good physically.

Factors leading to a race with the best focus and to a race with poor focus are discussed further below.

#### **Relaxation, Positive Thoughts & Positive Imagery**

In the week prior to the competition four of the athletes stated that staying relaxed was very important for having good focus, “Leading up to the race (a race with the best focus) the time I spent off the bike was really relaxing, we had really good massages” (Athlete 1). Staying positive was key to remaining calm and relaxed for most of the athletes,

*I was thinking about getting the good feeling while racing (the week leading up to the race). I'm going to feel good. The best riders in the world are going to be there. I'm excited. I'm with a new team, just the snow ball affect of all those good feelings. I was positive and confident but not cocky (Athlete 2).*

To help remain positive and confident, some athletes mentioned use of key words and positive self-talk.

*I find that to help focus it is good to have key words that you remember. By using them in training it helps you to remember them during the race so you can key on a word that helps you to spin, reminds you to attack,*

*that you are strong, that you love to climb, these kinds of things (Athlete 8)*

Another way to stay positive before and during the race was through the use of imagery as mentioned by athlete 2, “I use mental imagery, like what it would feel like to put on the leader’s jersey on the podium.” Five athletes also mentioned using mental imagery to prepare for the focus needed during the race,

*It helps to do positive imagery before the race but not necessarily the morning of, or even the day before, but the weeks up to and including. When you’re in that level of pain that is associated with racing and you need to go into your next zone, this positive imagery can come up as opposed to negative thoughts. I kind of put myself into a deep relaxation and then what I do is imagine myself riding and riding things well. And it’s a feeling as well as an image. It’s not just an image or a word. It does have a feeling with it, a more aggressive feeling as opposed to a fear feeling. With a fear feeling you kind of hold back and you kind of back away. Where with an aggressive feeling you’re more forward and aggressive and willing to attack the situations or obstacles (Athlete 8)*

*I visualize whenever I am just sitting around. I think about all the different parts of the course and how I’m going to ride them, go through the feelings I’m going to have before the race and at the start. Like just picturing staying relaxed and not getting upset if things are not going the way I want them to. I try to see how I’m going to start, knowing that its going to be harder at the end of the race and so I get ready for that (Athlete 10).*

Outside of doing imagery, six of the ten athletes also felt for them it was important

not to think too much about the race during the week beforehand,

*That is how I approach a big event, just to get as physically fit as I can and not to think about the big event too much. I make sure I know it (the upcoming race) is there, what my goals are, and to only think about the day-to-day going into it (Athlete 3).*

Thinking too much about the race sometimes can have an adverse effect,

*If you think too much about a big event coming up, you get excited but then you get a little stressed. I seem to turn thinking about it too much into something negative and then it becomes pressure. Then I just lose energy because my body is stressed and it’s a waste of energy (Athlete 3).*

### **Focus During the Race**

The athletes spoke about the types of thoughts they have and what they are focused on during a race where their focus is good. Athlete 5 spoke of being on automatic once the race is underway,

*I am on automatic mode once the race starts. The first five minutes I am focused on getting a position and after that its like I’m not focused. It’s almost like I’m unfocused, or I’m focusing so hard that I’m not thinking about focusing. It’s all automatic. It’s not as deliberate as the preparation up to the race.*

Every mountain bike course is unique in the difficulty of the terrain and the amount of ascending and descending. For both ascending and descending the athletes spoke of the importance of focusing on staying relaxed, even more importantly for descending. To stay relaxed on a descent athlete 1 said, “I try to keep breathing. When there’s some really tight descents where I

feel it's a little dangerous, I just remind myself to keep breathing because sometimes I find myself holding my breath and going oh, oh, oops. Something as simple as breathing you can forget sometimes." The athletes mentioned self-reminders that they used to maintain their best focus in downhill sections. For example, they focused on things such as keeping to the most efficient lines picked during preriding, staying smooth, looking far ahead, not panicking, remembering to let it go (relaxing and letting the breaks go), and to keep pedalling.

Although the athletes spoke of how their focus changes or shifts slightly for ascending versus descending, they also all agreed that the technical part of riding the race should be somewhat automatic. "I'm not really thinking about the riding very much during the race because hopefully I've had enough time to ride the course and think over the sections beforehand so its just automatic and routine riding during the race", said athlete 10.

There is also a constant shifting between internal feelings and the external things happening in the race, such as the changing terrain or the jockeying for position with other riders. The athletes believed that in their best races, for the majority of the time, they are a more focused on their internal feelings and pace rather than externally focused on the other competitors.

However, the race is still a thinking race and involves some external focusing. Four athletes felt that when they were given time splits and therefore knew how far behind or ahead they were of their competitors it helped them to focus on would be best at that point in the race. As stated by athlete 10, "I'm really focused on getting the time splits from different people to see how much the time gaps are closing, if I'm gaining and

how many places I'm going to be able to move up. That's what I'm thinking about most during the race." Athlete 7 summed it up as follows,

*The start of the race is a combined effort, it's internal and its external. Its external because you need to watch what's going on around you, you need to watch the people you are racing. But it's internal because you need to be more aware of your own effort. If you get caught up in the external you can blow your engine. Or if you get caught up in the internal and the race can ride away from you, and you won't ever see it again. So the first thirty-five to forty-five minutes of a race is a much more precarious place. And in ten to thirty minutes you really assess it. You're still calculating who is having a great day, who is going hard, who's going to blow up. And at the end of the first lap you really make an assessment. Was that too fast? Was that too hard? How long was the first lap? It's a thinking race but meanwhile you're in complete oxygen debt. Anaerobically you're punched. So you have to also be looking inside and deciding what kind of day you're having. You're watching everybody else but you're also reading all your meters and levels. Then you get into the body of the race which is how am I going to pace myself to and cater to my strengths so that I can win or do the best I can. I think some people get carried away with all the emotion or they get into worrying at the beginning and either they are not internal enough, or they get too caught up in the external with the racing going on.*

### **Planning and Preparation.**

There was a consensus among the athletes that in order to reach and maintain their best focus, their preparation and planning in the weeks and days beforehand played a critical part in how mentally focused they would be during the race. Athlete 1 stated, "Good

preparation, knowing that when you start on the line that you haven't forgotten anything, your bike is perfect, you've done as much as you possibly can, nothing is bugging you, that helps me focus."

Logistical preparation was a key factor in helping the athletes to have the most focused mindset before a race. Arriving at the race site early, getting to know the course well, and making sure one's bike was working properly are examples of the kind of controlled preparation that helps facilitate good race focus,

*I was there (at the course site) eight days before the race so all I had to do was think about the time trial, the dirt crit (short dirt track criterion race). I get onto the course, get into the feeling on the bike, the feeling of the pedals turning beneath my legs. Getting towards the race I get on the course again and again, getting the feeling as if I'm in the race, trying each section out (Athlete 2)*

*I make sure my bike is good, working well. I got there about eight days before the race and made sure I knew the course like the back of my hand. I was constantly redoing every section. There was one day where it was horrible conditions, raining and there were people crashing all over the course. I was thinking, this might happen during the race so I'm going to go out there and test it out (Athlete 3)*

A race with good focus often grew naturally out of good preparation beforehand. A race without good focus was often linked to poor preparation leading up to the race or not respecting the preparation patterns that have worked for them. Not arriving early enough, not knowing the course well enough as well as other factors or distractions that took place before the start often interfered with a good race focus. Four athletes gave exam-

ples of situations that interfered with good focus,

*It is usually because of things that happen leading up to the start. Every time I think back to a race that went really bad, it really has been a physical problem that started it, whether I was sick or not rested. And the things that are most frustrating that can set me off are the things that are out of my control like travel, jet lag, and sometimes diet depending on where you are and what they feed you. So the things that are out of your control really bother me. It would be really great if you could have everything just like at home but it won't ever happen so just try and go with it. Stay relaxed and hopefully things won't bother you too much. (Athlete 1)*

*I flew in the last minute. I thought, I'm going to the Nationals, its nothing so I'll fly in Friday night, with seven hours of flying, totally last minute. I got there and didn't go out for my usual steak and rice or steak and pasta. I went out for some East Indian food. I wasn't taking it seriously mentally, or physically obviously because of the whole travelling and then eating wrong and then cruising around. Then we go warm up on the course and I was like ah, I just need to do a lap and it was super technical. I was unprepared in every possible way and I brought it on myself and I didn't even see that. Then the night before the race I didn't ice my legs so every single thing I did wrong to not have the focus for the race. It was everything I did before the start line that led to me not having the right focus. (Athlete 2)*

### **Physical Readiness Influences**

Before the race there are many things that the athletes consciously prepare in order to be as focused as possible going into competition (see Table 4). Such preparation included preparing their bike and water bot-



bles, choosing the correct tire selection according to weather conditions, getting to know the course and opponents, keeping themselves as relaxed as possible, and controlling their diet and amount of rest. However once the race was under way, getting into and maintaining one's best focus seemed to be a mixture of physical readiness, mental readiness and the ability to stay on task for the duration of the race. As athlete 5 stated, "To get everything to come together on race day is so hard. There are so many factors. So you've got some factors that are within your control and some that are not. So everything that is within your control you have to try and make positive and prepare."

The extent to which one was physically prepared, healthy, fit and rested shortly before the race, and how good they felt physically during the race was very much linked to having good mental focus for six athletes,

*I went in really well focused, did everything right at the beginning, went in really very well prepared mentally, prepared to do just the best race of my life. Then for whatever reason my body physically was not up to par, and I realized that in the first ten minutes that I wasn't having the race of my life. Its very, very frustrating because mentally you're expecting yourself to do really well, but physically there is something up and you're not. In the race situation all you know is that instead of winning maybe you're fifteenth And from there you can then spiral downwards pretty quickly because then if you lose your mental and on top of that you can just continue to have a bad race. One of the things I use for my mental imagery is about challenges. So that would be an example of a time where I would cue into myself and tell myself I love a challenge. And obviously this is going to be a challenge to finish the race in a*

*respectable position and to try and turn that around and bring it back. (Athlete 8).*

*If I compare a bad race, my focus was gone because my body was gone. It didn't matter how strong my brain or my mind was. I could finish. I could dig. I could plummet emotional depths. I could draw all the mental focus I wanted but I wasn't going fast because my body was gone. I was too fatigued to be able to concentrate. And that might be my thing. I need to have physical reserves that will allow me to dig deep. When there is no room for extra thinking and you're just struggling to make the time or the speed or to hang on to the wheels in front of you, you can't think about anything else. All you can think about is stopping. I think when I'm not fit and my results are not as good, my focus is not as good. Its like not being fresh, you don't have the ability or extra strength to draw your energy. You don't have the confidence. Your confidence and focus are tied together (Athlete 7).*

Two other athletes brought up situations where they had difficulties regaining an effective focus :

*I've had races sort of fall apart where you crash and you try and get back up and get going and you crash again, and it gets worse and then you lose concentration. You just try and get on your bike and go, you're not even thinking or anything. You're not relaxing. Your heart rate is going higher and you're going anaerobic trying to get up the hill or going down. You just lose it basically. Everything just scatters and you're all cut up, and it just falls apart and eventually you get to a point and you just say, oh fuck it (Athlete 9).*

*If you're not performing well at all then it's basically a downward spiral because you're feeling bad. Then you just totally lose focus*

*and you just think about quitting or what you're going to eat for dinner. My thoughts go off the race totally. Oh, I just can't wait for this to be over. Please give me a flat tire, stuff like that. How you're feeling leads to what kind of thoughts you start to have during the race. They go hand in hand. If I'm feeling good, then happy thoughts are with me when thinking about the race. If I'm feeling bad, then bad thoughts (Athlete 6).*

### **Post-Race Focus**

Five of the athletes spoke of taking time to evaluate the race afterwards. They spoke of analyzing what went well, what went poorly and what they could do to improve next time whether it be in race preparation or race strategy and pacing.

*After the race I think it's important to look back on your race. If you had a really good race its really important to look back and see what you did well. Even if you did do well (had a good result), maybe you performed poorly and everyone else performed even worse. Even if you won, you still may have been able to improve on things. And then if you didn't do well in the race, (its important to think about) your perception of what went badly, why was it that you didn't do well. Was it your focus? Was it what you ate? Was it the course? Were you too excited? Things like that. I think it's important to go back and look at it. But I also think that has to be done quickly and then to move on. Get information from it and use it but move on (Athlete 8)*

*After the race I really like to look at all the time gaps to the position where I finished and go through the race in my head. I look for all the places where maybe I lost a little time or I maybe could have pushed myself a little harder. I'll really go through the race and try to think of all the places where I*

*could still improve in the course or in my strategy (Athlete 10).*

### **Refocusing**

In the sport of mountain biking racing there is a high probability that something will happen which will cause the racer to suddenly be brought to a complete stop momentarily in the middle of a fast paced race. The most common occurrences that can temporarily cause the racer to be sidelined are 1) flat tires and other mechanical problems with the bike, or 2) a crash. In these situations, the racer is instantly forced to refocus their thoughts and energy from the race to an unexpected flat tire or a painful crash and then shift focus again to get back into the race again.

### **Flat Tires**

When it comes to something like a flat tire, the athletes stressed the importance of practicing how to change a flat tire before it occurs in a big race. When faced with a flat tire during a race, the athletes emphasized the importance of remaining calm, easing back into the pace of the race slowly, and staying positive about the rest of the race,

*What I've learned is that you have to start back slowly, not to go crazy right off the bat getting your legs huge and full of lactate. So you just start easy again and try to be relaxed about it. Okay, I've lost so many positions but hopefully I can come back. You have to try and look at it in a positive way like I just got a rest, I had something to drink, stretched out. There's really no positive way to look at getting a flat tire but I guess you can try (to make the best out of it) (Athlete 1).*

*Basically I find that you just have to slow everything down. You have to turn the adrenaline switch off. You might have it (adrenaline) going when you're changing*

*your tire but when you hop on the bike you have to rethink. Sure you could punch it and make up the time by doing the fastest lap out of anyone on the course which is usually what happens. But you have to breathe deeply and just slow it all down. Start going back at it and get the positive feelings from the course. Because if you hop on the bike and you got the adrenaline going, you become erratic. You're not focused on the task at hand and what's in front of you and the trail. So I find that if I just slow it down and even though I may have lost ten spots, just slowly work on picking people off, each person in front of you as a goal, to slowly reel them in and just drop them (Athlete 2).*

### **Crashes**

A second common situation that can suddenly throw one's focus off momentarily is a crash where you are thrown off your bike and possibly end up in some pain. Athlete 4 described what it is sometimes like to crash during a mountain bike race, "For like half an hour it's as if you're just sitting in a chair and someone is hitting you with a crow bar. On top of the pain, you're also sitting on a bike with a heart rate of one-hundred and eighty". After crashes you can keep on going but sometimes it can be questionable whether it is wise to continue.

The athletes also talked about the importance of slowing down for a moment to refocus after a crash. In a race there is the race adrenaline which is telling you to get back going as fast as possible. The athletes spoke about the importance of slowing down their breathing in order to refocus and get back into the rhythm of the race again, as well as taking the time to make sure they were not seriously injured,

*I've had many times where something will happen and it totally blows you off. It could be a person crashing into you, could be just*

*a crash, could be a mechanical. I have a key phrase which is, "I love a challenge", and when I start dwelling on it (a problem), I just say to myself, "I love a challenge and ya, just go for it!". In Mazatland I crashed really hard on the first lap. I was in second, right with the leader, and I just lost it and did a huge superman right down the descent. I got back up, got back on the bike, and the whole drive train was all wrapped around itself. So I unwrapped it, got back on the bike again and the seat was just totally bent right out of whack. So I was getting on (the bike) going, "oh no, what am I going to do?". And then I thought, "No, I love a challenge" and then I just attacked and that was it. I just ignored it (the seat) for the rest of the race. It's interesting when you can do that and keep that from affecting you. Ya, you're a little bit sore the next day but I still finished fourth (Athlete 8).*

*With a crash your heart rate just goes way high. That whole ten second motion of about to crash, to crashing, to fully off your bike, to rolling around, to picking your bike up, you've held your breath for ten to fifteen seconds so your heart rate has gone up, your adrenaline is pumping. You just gotta get on and just refocus. Focus on slowing down your breathing and realizing that it is not the end of the world because its not. You've still got the rest of the race (Athlete 2).*

### **Focus and Training**

When asked how their training focus compared to their race focus, the athletes indicated they practiced the kind of focus needed for racing in several different ways. Athletes 1, 3, 8, and 10 mentioned that they practiced race focus in training by pushing oneself to suffer like one would in a race during training, simulating race situations during interval training, practicing positive key words and self-talk in training to be

used in racing, visualizing feeling strong in upcoming races while training and using smaller training races to prepare for bigger races. Athlete 7 summed how focus is practiced in training, “In training you put things together in small packages and then you put those packages into bigger packages until you get to the race.”

*For example, if you're doing intervals and you've been working on your pedal stroke, and you've been thinking 'push pull' as in circles. You need to remember that in races so in your training rides during your intervals you just say those to yourself, “ok, push pull, push pull” or during your interval you say “attack, attack, or focus”, “I'm strong”, “I'm good, I can win”, or “aggression”. If you say these key words as you're doing your interval; number one, they should help your interval go better because you're getting into your race zone, and two, it becomes a little bit more innate in that hopefully the key words will come naturally when you're racing hard. I find that when you're racing hard there is very little blood flow going to your brain. You almost have to brainwash yourself beforehand to actually think of stuff and to overcome the negative feeling of, “oh I don't feel very good”, or “this is a hard hill”, or “its really hot today”, or “I should be beating that person”. All those negative things need to be off set by the positives. I have positive phrases that I've made up for myself and they are very general, mostly about working hard and keeping focused and pushing, or attacking, or going as hard as I can. I sat down and I made these phrases, and then slowly I use them in practice. And that takes time because I have to remember that you want to use them in practice, and then I have to physically do it during practice. And I forget if I don't keep reminding myself. So it's hard work. Then as you do it again and again it becomes more*

*natural. That's why you kind of need to start at the beginning of the year. Its not something where you just on a Friday can get psyched up for Sunday's race, and then Monday to Thursday don't ever think about the things you've done. It's something that you really have to practice. (Athlete 8).*

*I think that race focus compares to training focus. I like to know a couple days ahead how my training is going to be so I can mentally prepare for that and plan my day. For a lot of my training rides I repeat different loops and I keep a record of my times to see if I'm improving. That's what I focus on during my rides to keep it going. I do a lot of focusing for racing in training. While I'm training I think about all the races I have coming up, and just going through them in my head as much as I can which motivates me for my training. I think about all the races I have coming up and just try to visualize how I want to be doing at those races, visualize feeling really strong in those races while training (Athlete 10).*

Some athletes found that race focus could be simulated in training for certain situations. For example, long, hard training rides can be used to simulate some of the preparation needed for a race. Others mentioned they practiced their race focus when they were using a race for training. However, it is important to note that in some segments of training the goal is to taper or to go easier.

*The whole focusing for racing is different than the training I'd say for me. When I go train there is a feeling of feeling good, like when I'm ready to peak for a race but that's different because usually I'm not training through that portion. But say I'm in a three week training block, there's no racing, the way I focus is just this is my job, its going to really suck. This is what I have to do to make money to be able to do what I do. I*

*think a lot like that. Okay, I've gotta do this this week and its going to be even harder next week but I'm going to see good form the weekend after and then I'm going to have those positive feelings. Have a good race and feel good about myself and maybe get some money (Athlete 2).*

*Sometimes if I'm doing some big epic ride and I'm doing it with other top riders, then we're going to be out there a long time, its going to be hard so I'll do all the things. I make sure I don't eat too close beforehand, that I eat enough. I make sure I bring water, I make sure I'm drinking. So it is kind of like practicing racing. But I don't go out on a solo ride and go okay, I'm going to go through all the stuff like before a race because its not like race. Whereas if I go out with other people and its going to be intense or if I do practice races that are races but they're not important to me, that's sort of similar (Athlete 5).*

Athlete 6 brought up how racing is much more emotional than training which makes racing difficult to simulate in training. Therefore training races are a means of simulating the emotional component of racing,

*The training, it seems to be totally different from the racing because you don't get the feelings involved that you do with racing because racing is quite emotional. Leading up to the race there's a lot of hype and excitement around. When you're at home by yourself there's none of those feelings involved so it's a totally different feeling. It's harder too (to focus for training as compared to racing). When I'm at home a lot I'll just do training races and stuff instead of doing the training. Training races help me get motivated and focused for training because you can get a better simulation of the race instead of being by yourself and*

*trying to duplicate it. Its good to go to just a small regional race and you can still get the feeling. There's a lot of people around and you get people to push you to a higher level because sometimes when you're by yourself, you'll do a workout and you'll just be like ugh, I don't want to do this. But when you're around other people, they're pushing you to dig deeper and race hard.*

### **Improving Focus**

When asked if they felt they presently had good mental focus, four out of ten athletes responded with a confident yes, while the remaining six were still hoping to improve their mental focus. For example, athlete 2 thought he could have better mental focus when dealing with an injury, athlete 3 wanted to improve upon not being so easily distracted and reacting emotionally to situations, and athlete 9 thought his mental focus could be better at big qualifying races.

When asked if there were any areas they were working on to improve their mental focus, either to increase their present level of performance or performance consistency, nine out of ten athletes mentioned specific things they were working on or would like to work on. Three out of the ten athletes mentioned wanting to improve their confidence in their preparation, their training and their technical and physical racing ability,

*I think you're always trying to work on your confidence. There's always a bit of doubt coming into races, whether you feel like you're going to do well or not. Another part you can always work on is just maintaining focus throughout the middle of the race. There's always a time in the middle of the race where's there's a little bit of a lull. You sometimes let down a little bit and start thinking about how much longer the race is and thinking I'm not feeling too well. So its important to work on being able to just focus*

*on pushing through that and being confident right until the end. I don't think it (confidence) is something you can consciously work on during a race. I think you can work on just getting ready, visualizing, knowing that you're going to have those kind of feelings during the race. Just recognizing that it is going to happen, and coming into a race with confidence....confidence can be a very fragile thing. It comes with experience, having confidence that you've been training well and have taken care of your preparation, and other things (Athlete 10).*

All athletes were working on very individual aspects of focus in order to improve the quality and consistency of their performance. Improving focus included working on technical skills and diet, mental focus for riding in the rain, analyzing races better and applying more mental skills and tools, keeping training routines during the race season, training better, taking care of yourself and increasing motivation to push 100%:

*I think it's really important that consistency is there, that you're always focused and always doing the same thing. This is better than having a really good day and then three races where you just have zero focus. I've always been very consistent so I want to keep it that way. But I want to be able to work on my focus so that I can reach that prime focus where I go above and beyond my capacities and reach that one hundred percent more easily. I think it (consistency) comes with practice and through working with a Sport Psychologist. If your motivation is good then the intensity of your training is good. If the intensity of your training is good, your fitness and performance will be at a higher level. All that starts with motivation. And I think before that is focus because if you're not focused, you're not*

*going to have the motivation to ride. So I think it's all intertwined (Athlete 8).*

*For me to ride technically well more consistently would be the best thing I could do right now to improve my performance. I think my preparation there is the problem. I'm not doing enough technical riding in my actual training. I always avoid doing it because I don't like doing it alone. It's mostly during racing that I ride single track. I know I'm capable of doing it because I've done it and after a few days I improve a lot. Diet I think is also a really big thing. I'm learning this year a couple things about my diet. Things like allergies or tolerance to certain foods is huge because I think after all the years of shovelling huge amounts of food through your body, your organs and your digestive system have done a lot of work. I'm in my tenth year now of cycling. So I'm just starting to figure out a lot of stuff out and going good. My body is developed. I'm developed as much as I'm going to be now at twenty-five. You have to take care of yourself. You have to eat well, sleep good. God knows, you've seen the posture on some of these bike riders after ten years. It's not attractive. So it's a bit of a compromise there. The years help you but if you don't take care of yourself they can hurt you too (Athlete 1).*

### **Changes over Race Career and Race Course**

Eight of the ten athletes had been mountain bike racing nine to twelve years. The other two have been mountain bike racing four and five years but they both were road bike racers for five to ten years before switching to mountain bike racing, which has many skills that are transferable to mountain biking. Now that the athletes are at the professional level, some talked about how their focus has changed and progressed from their beginnings in the sport until now. When

racing is your job there can be more pressure put on your placing. “There’s more pressure for placing and outcome now. There’s no security so you’re fighting for a job” (Athlete 2). As athlete 7 succinctly summed it up, “It’s a natural progression, when your hobby becomes a job, you then go to positioning. Then you go to money and you waver back and forth. But you have to do it in the end because you enjoy it.”

Athlete 4 talked about the changing demands he’s faced throughout his career,

*It went from fun riding to professional riding. The sponsors want me to do well. The CCA wants me to go do this race and this race and I don’t have much say. The other thing is that races are just so much harder than they used to be. If I compare racing Quebec Cups as a junior to racing World Cups as a senior in 2000 where the calibre is just crazy, the whole racing aspect is definitely different. There are so many more variables to take into account from travelling logistics, media, and having everything ready for the race. You have to think one month in advance to get registered for a World Cup. You have to figure out where you’re going to sleep and who you’re going to go with. So it’s more of a job now than it used to be.*

Athlete 9 described how his focus has changed in races as he has improved as a racer,

*When I first started racing mountain bikes it was like, my god, am I going to be able to stay on my bike? Am I even going to be able to ride the stuff that these guys are riding? And then when I figured that out, it was like ok well my technical ability is pretty good and I can survive the races with these guys. Then I was more focusing on who I’m racing against, how I can beat them, or if I could*

*beat them, finding out their weaknesses, just through knowing them, whether they be climbing or descending or abilities in different weather conditions. I know people don’t like certain conditions and who likes what conditions, who goes good in what conditions. I can sort of focus on them by either trying to stay with them if I’m not too sure what’s going on, or trying to stay ahead of them if I’m pretty confident you can beat them. So definitely it (my focus) has changed since I started. Where before I was more concerned about finishing or completing an event, now I’m more concerned about winning.*

The pressure and enjoyment levels can also change over the course of an athlete’s career. Athlete 1 talked about how he felt he’d come full circle in this respect,

*When I was a junior I wasn’t worried about the outcome. I was just there to go my hardest. Now there’s more pressure to perform when I’m on a big team. On these bigger teams when you’re around a lot more of the successful athletes I learn more and more that they’re not so worried about the results and that they (good results) just come. It’s always harder when you’re trying to make a breakthrough when a breakthrough is all you need. So I guess it sort have has come full circle again for me from when I was a junior until now. I felt less pressure when I first started too because it just wasn’t serious. Then there was that struggle period in between where I was feeling like ah, I have to get a better result and justify why I’m doing this. Now I feel like its okay, I’ve relaxed and results are still coming.*

In response to the question of how their mental focus has improved or changed over the course of their racing career, some unique answers were given as well as some

common ones. Some examples of the unique changes in focus included the aspects of learning to redefine what 100% is, increased sacrifice while maintaining balance, better preparation, better relaxation skills, better ability to keep the proper perspective, knowing how to analyze better, and racing smarter.

*I think when you first start racing you push yourself, but you push yourself maybe to ninety percent and the more you race and the more you learn about yourself, the more often you can push yourself to one hundred percent. I can't push myself one hundred percent easily and I don't do it every race. So when I do it's a really good race for me. I think when you hit a certain pain level, your body just tells you that's it. And in most cases its kind of like you hit a V in the road and you subconsciously make the decision of whether to go harder or whether to slow down or keep the same pace. If you choose the safe route then you're not going to blow up. You'll probably finish the race in a respectable position but what you need to do if you're not winning is to choose that other option which is to go that extra two or three percent and risk failure. Because it's possible that you could blow a gasket and not finish the race or all of a sudden have to crawl back. But if you do succeed you will probably really succeed through having pushed yourself that two or three percent more than you would have. I think its really hard for me to make that decision and more often that not, I subconsciously take the safer route for whatever reason that is, whether it's a confidence thing, or a motivation thing, or just lack of wanting to go. That's why I say my mental focus is only a seven or an eight. Right now every race I don't know when I'm hitting that V. After the race is over I look back and think, "Ok, I could have gone harder there", or "I probably should have decided to go harder there*

*when that person attacked, I should have counter-attacked", things like that. And a lot of times its just telling myself, "don't think, just go." I think when I first started I never rode one hundred percent during a race. It was always the safe race. Even though physically, you're exhausted at the end of the race, you don't have the ability yet to push yourself that hard. Now I think I realize that there is a distinction and I have been able to go beyond that. I think when I began was like kindergarten and now I feel like I'm in university. And it's just the finer points of all aspects of the focus I've improved upon (Athlete 7).*

### **Athletes Suggestions for Developing Focus**

The final question posed to the athletes was whether they had any advice for someone up and coming in their sport on how to develop their best focus. The athletes noted that developing focus is an individual pursuit, but they also offered advice that can definitely speed up the process. Most advice centered on the aspects of learning through trial and error, learning proper race preparation and keeping a healthy perspective as to why you compete in the sport. Athlete 1 felt that developing focus is a very individual journey,

*I think it is a very individual thing. The way people learn and the way they develop is very personalized. At a junior age I didn't have much guidance. When I think about anybody who has been over coached and over taught, especially at a young age, a lot of them have just quit. You look at somebody like Greg LeMond and actually his life experience. He learned a lot for himself. He did a lot of things on his own and was more of a free spirit, kind of a corny cliché, but he did a lot of that. So he developed into a super champion. Everyone has got talent. You've got talent. I've got talent. Sometimes you just don't improve for a few years for*



*whatever reasons and it's how you come through that (Athlete 1).*

Other athletes also felt that developing focus was individual and they had several suggestions to give such as preparation advice, visualization techniques, learning through talking to others, not comparing yourself to others, reading books on sport psychology, and the importance of learning through trial and error,

*I think it is individual (developing focus). I mean I have lots of suggestions for juniors and I've helped out a lot of juniors. I tell them what to focus on and what I think might develop their ability to focus. I talk about preparing, about diet, and how that will help them. I think by just telling them that, they think about it. I think that helps build their confidence and focus. I might suggest breathing exercises when they're sitting at home. And then labelling yourself, like I'm a wolf. I think that's a good way to teach somebody about focus. Start off that way, the breathing and relaxing, and thinking of yourself as a racer, what animal you'd want to be when your out on the course and then how that would work with your racing (Athlete 2).*

*It's so individual. I think that you just need to find (possibilities) and experiment. So just take every chance and talk to people, not being afraid to talk. Pick someone's brain, it's not a bad thing and a lot of people want to share it. If someone came up to me and asked me questions I'm going to be more than happy to share some of my experience, so not to be afraid if you have questions to ask them (Athlete 4).*

*Go through things methodically. Get a pattern on how you prepare step by step for a race and follow that. It takes a bit of time because you'll learn through trial and error*

*what works best for you. I think visualizing the course and the whole positive thing is really important. The biggest thing I can say when I see people coming up is not to compare themselves to others. It's like when you talk about heart rates. You can't compare my heart rate to a top male rider's heart rate. You have to look at where you are at one point and where you are at the next point. That's what you want to know, where you're at, what you want to be, what you've got to do and not anybody else. It's like anything when you establish small goals. When you get something finished by breaking it up into small tasks you feel great. Well you can break your race prep up into small tasks, then when you know that you've done everything that you can up to that day ... and don't think about anyone else. Then you will start to reach your goals (Athlete 5).*

Athletes 3, 6, and 7 emphasized keeping things in perspective,

*Keep perspective. It is bike racing and it's a lot more pleasurable if you make it fun. You need to take as much experience from others and from all the road races as you can and keep it fun. It can't be fun all the time but not to be scared of having a fun moment or having a fun day. Keep perspective. You've got two legs and two arms. Having a quadriplegic neighbour definitely put a lot of perspective on stuff for me. Find something to bring you back down to earth if you think you are not totally there, or if you could get too caught up into it, go back in the real world for a couple of days and just keep perspective (Athlete 3).*

*I would say that you have to really remember why you're doing it. You need to do it because you love it. You need to be patient and when you can honestly say that you've done everything in your powers to prepare,*

*and you're confident about that, then all you need to do is to focus. You need to do all your homework, and all of your research, and have all the ability and faith that you've prepared properly. Then you focus it all through your bicycle and that's your focus (Athlete 7).*

*Just stay calm because there is no point on wasting energy being nervous. I tell people that at the end of the day, it's just a bike race. Perspective, and staying calm (Athlete 6).*

### **Integration and Conclusions**

This study advanced our knowledge on how elite athletes perceive, define and direct their focus. To prepare an optimal focus for racing, athletes talked about how they planned ahead of time how they would focus for different points in the race. For example, athlete 10 described how his focus changes over the duration of the race as follows,

*Part of my race strategy is to start off at an even pace and not go out too hard. So right off the start you have to worry about getting a good position. During the first thirty seconds I try to move up a little bit and then just focus on relaxing and not getting caught up in using any excess energy fighting someone for position after that. Because it's just a waste of energy at the start to try and gain one or two spots when at the end you can make it up no problem. So the first lap or two of any race I just try and focus on staying relaxed, just spinning and not wasting energy. The way I race I'm really focused on maintaining a steady pace and watching my heart rate. And then as the race moves on, it's usually easier to move through people which helps because when you're passing people you feel a lot better. Towards the latter point of the race it is important to keep pressing and not slow down to the pace of the people you are*

*passing. I have to try and focus on maintaining my pace and moving forward as much as I can towards the end.*

There is a constant shifting back and forth from internal to external focus as described by athlete 7,

*The start of the race is a combined effort, it's internal and its external. Its external because you need to watch what's going on around you, you need to watch the people you are racing. But it's internal because you need to be more aware of your own effort. If you get caught up in the external you can blow your engine. Or if you get caught up in the internal and the race can ride away from you, and you won't ever see it again. So the first thirty-five to forty-five minutes of a race is a much more precarious place. And in ten to thirty minutes you really assess it. You're still calculating who is having a great day, who is going hard, who's going to blow up. And at the end of the first lap you really make an assessment. Was that too fast? Was that too hard? How long was the first lap? It's a thinking race but meanwhile you're in complete oxygen debt. Anaerobically you're punched. So you have to also be looking inside and deciding what kind of day you're having. You're watching everybody else but you're also reading all your meters and levels. Then you get into the body of the race which is how am I going to pace myself to and cater to my strengths so that I can win or do the best I can. I think some people get carried away with all the emotion or they get into worrying at the beginning and either they are not internal enough, or they get too caught up in the external with the racing going on.*

Athletes can prepare themselves for the shifting of focus that goes on during a race as described by athlete 8,

*When I'm pre-riding the courses usually I decide which areas are good for attacking, standing up, sitting down, doing certain things with the bike, going smooth etc. Then it's just a matter of reminding myself before the race starts and then remembering during the race. Even different strategies per lap, deciding what the goal of the first lap is going to be, second, third, fourth, and then following through on that in the race.*

The athletes also spoke about different types of focus that they consciously shifted into for different parts of the race. For example, the athletes mentioned the importance of remaining relaxed while climbing, and more critically, while descending,

*Its good to stay relaxed while climbing and descending but I'd say even more importantly when you're descending. I try to keep breathing. When there's some really tight descents where I feel it's a little dangerous, I just remind myself to keep breathing (Athlete 1).*

The athletes also used positive self-talk and self-reminders to maintain an effective focus throughout the race. There is a continual shifting between how the athlete is feeling internally (ie. heart rate, target pace), where the competition is in relation to them (ie. position, time splits from leaders etc.), when to eat or drink (ie. its more important to focus on drinking in the heat), and what to focus on for descents (relaxing, looking ahead, breathing) or climbing (staying relaxed, keeping pace).

### **Extending Capacity of Focus**

An athlete's focus can be more limited at the beginning of their career in comparison to ten years later as a professional. As athlete 10 mentioned,

*When I first started I had to focus a lot more on just getting to the race and making my bike work perfectly. Now that I'm on a big team I don't have to worry about that, I'm able to just focus entirely on feeling good for the race.*

The limits of focus can be extended with experience. For example athlete 9 talked about how, when he first started racing, all his attention was focused on staying on his bike, and whether he would be able to technically ride the whole course. When his technical ability improved enough, it enabled him to focus more on fine tuning his strategy depending on who the competition would be and what the weather and trail conditions would be. Athlete 10 also talked about the focus needed for technical skills in the beginning,

*I think the first two or three years when I was still improving on my technical skills it (technical riding) was more of a focus but now I think after two or three years I was at a sufficient level for all the big races. There's nothing that's going to really scare me or break my focus mentally on the race courses, it's all fairly routine in the races.*

The same athlete talked about what he was able to shift his focus to once he didn't need to focus so much on his technical riding,

*I'm not really thinking about riding very much during the race because hopefully I've had enough time to ride the course and think over the sections beforehand so its just automatic and routine riding through the course during the race. I'm more focusing on drinking and getting the liquids down, how far in front of me the next people are and maintaining the gaps. I'm really focused on getting the time splits from different people to see how much the time gaps are closing, if I'm gaining and how many places*

*I'm going to be able to move up. That's what I'm thinking about during most of the race.*

This study confirms that athletes are able to accurately report their focus across varying situations, and that they can describe focus accurately through self-analysis and language. Although skills that once required much conscious attention became automatized at the level they are at now, (ie. Technical riding skills, tire changing skills), they were still able to self-report these processes by reflecting on their initial experiences in the sport as illustrated by the following quote from athlete 9,

*I remember the first time I flatted I was trying to fix it and I was having so many problems with my gloves getting all wrapped in the tire bead and all this crazy stuff going on. Now it's like automatic, you get a flat; Ok I take my gloves off. I try to ride as long as I can and get everything ready so when I stop I can go right into changing the flat.*

As the athlete advances and gains experience in their sport, less conscious focus is needed for the basics, although they should never be forgotten, and more focus can be given to refining and finding ways to continually improve or get the edge. As their daily life and performance becomes more routine, the athletes can turn more of their attention into fine tuning their focus and mental game.

All athletes in this study experienced anxiety, doubts and distractions at one time or another. They all developed different focusing skills to combat distractions, anxiety, negative thoughts and negative feelings. For example, they developed precise and methodical preparation skills for racing in order to combat distracting anxiety and build confidence as illustrated by athlete 10,

*I think it's just being completely prepared and knowing exactly what's going to happen that gets me in a relaxed state, getting all the anxiety out of the way by knowing the whole course, knowing my bike is working well and having planned out my strategy for the race.*

Through focused practice and learning from experience, the skills developed become automatic more easily, to the point that one can trust their own preparation and abilities,

*If you stress out or you're thinking too hard, that's when you start to make mistakes. When I just let the ten years I've spent developing my skills go by instinct, then it flows a lot better for me.*

The present study suggests that as the athletes gain increased mastery over their technical and mental skills, they are free to enter a higher level of focusing and begin to fine tune their performance by focusing on the right things. The athletes in the present study described many improvements and refinements they had made in their focusing skills over the course of their sport career. Their detailed descriptions show that they became increasingly effective in their focusing skills and were committed to the continued improvement and refinement of their focusing skills.

### **Reflections**

Focus, and in particular competition focus, is the result of the sum total of an athlete's prior training and preparation. As athlete 1 said, "Focus, I believe, is like a sum of all the things you've been through." An athlete begins with a vision or goal, and focuses on attaining those goals. There is a link between focus and goals, as identified by Athlete 4,

*I think it (focus) goes with motivation. That's the main drive. You have to set your goals before your training year or racing season. And once you know what you want to do, that gets you the most focused.*

Focus is a part of every step you take. Focus is required to manage every aspect of a high performance athlete's day, with continual attention to daily goals and planning ahead keeping the long-term vision in mind. Gaining a high quality focus is an ongoing learning process. Elite athletes engage in a process that centers on continuing to learn about their body and mind as they attempt to do what helps to make them feel best and be enter their best performance focus. Answers are sought to questions that will allow them to become their best, such as : How much sleep do I need every night to feel my best and to be able to put my best effort into my training? What kinds of foods do I need to eat every day in order to meet my individual nutritional needs? What activities should I be involved in inside and outside of my training and how will they impact my training and racing? How can I enter and maintain my best focus for the duration on my performance?

Athlete 7 touched on the encompassing texture of the word focus,

*Focus is an interesting word. It's like a focal point of so many aspects of sport. You're talking about the mental focus but its interestingly tied to the physical preparation. And then everything else is all percentages and pieces of the puzzle. The focus is just what comes out when the puzzle is all put together. It might not be the right puzzle. You can change your pieces around and try a new focus, a new combination. But it is what shows up at the race when you've done all your homework and all your*

*preparation, and all your distractions are put aside.*

As focus develops, certain things become automatic and more instinctual over time. For example, the athletes talked about how changing a flat tire becomes instinctual and automatic after enough practice. Other examples of “pieces of the puzzle” that can become automatic are going to bed at the appropriate time, eating well and adding certain elements into training such as stretching and positive mental preparation. After a certain amount of practice, less conscious effort is required to focus well and perform well. Focus becomes more fluid and natural when you know how you want to focus and practice doing it. As training quality and intensity increases over an athlete's career, the ability to focus for longer periods of time also increases in training and racing.

When beginning mountain bike training it takes more concerted concentration just to learn the basics and get through the course safely. Through continued practice, certain aspects of preparation routines become habit and there is an increased emphasis on learning what to focus on, or not to focus on, during training and competition in order to attain the highest quality training and performance.

Preparation strategies are very individual. Going into a competition some athletes prefer to surround themselves with others in order to distract themselves from their own nervousness. Athlete 8 talked about the importance of knowing how one focuses best,

*For an internal focuser, like myself, if I'm distracted externally then I'll just lose my concentration and forget my strategies. We travel a lot together as teams. It's interesting to realize that other people perform better under different circumstances*

*than me. For example, my teammate is more of an external focuser. So the two of us can't really spend a race morning too much together. If I don't talk to her then she'll just be too nervous, and if she talks to me then I'll forget what I'm doing. So we know that about each other so it helps us, which is kind of neat.*

Through racing and reflection the athletes learn what focusing techniques help them to stay positive and focused in all sorts of different race situations such as a bad start, a crash, a mechanical problem, and weather conditions such as muddy or dry, cold or hot.

### **Issues of Balance**

Discovering the best focus is also about athletes finding the best balance within their lives. For example, one athlete might find they focus best by being a full-time athlete, if given the opportunity and support to do so. Others might find they focus best while pursuing other interests such as school or a career concurrently. The extent to which one respects different parts of their life, or feels good about experiencing a sense of balance, may be an individual matter. However in the long run, keeping a sense of joy, balance or perspective in one's pursuits and life is extremely important. Some athletes in this study valued balance, and continued to develop other parts of their life and pursue other interests during their competitive years. Athlete 2 talked about the importance of balance to him,

*I think I have a really good balance and that's the way I approach the sport. I've got a lot of friends outside of cycling and I'm glad I have that because if you make this (mountain bike racing) your life you can miss out on a lot. I haven't missed out on anything growing up, the teenage years, and in my twenties. And I see what some of the*

*guys have missed and how they deal with society. Like you look at a top male rider, at the bar at the Worlds, no one to talk to. He can't talk to anyone, no social skills. He's burned everyone's bridges, no one to hang out with.*

Some athletes focus solely on their sport and restricted participating in anything else that might interfere with their sport performance. One athlete commented that this kind of focus would mean great sacrifice,

*The person would sacrifice anything for whatever he's doing. The guy with the best focus, like the top male riders, they'll do anything. Like I know for a fact, (top male rider), he won Nappa, a really fast guy, the guy lives for his bike. It's all focus. He doesn't do anything. Everything is devoted to make his legs faster and to make him faster. Everything is related to how it will affect his race. Every single day of that guys year is planned out, rest days, everything. He wouldn't dare think of eating a tenth of a chocolate bar or a coke. All he does...he's focusing on everything that he thinks makes him a champion. He does psychological preparation too to relax himself, mental imagery for thinking about the next race, the next task at hand, the next interval. He sacrifices everything and that's what makes him a great champion.*

Great focus also means one is fully committed to their sporting goals as well as fully confident in themselves, as illustrated in the following quotes by athletes,

*A great focus would be to just be totally confident in yourself. If you don't feel 100%, not to panic and just deal with that. So a great focus would be to just trust yourself. A great focus would be to be so confident in yourself that nothing will stop you, and being confident in yourself comes from a*

*whole bunch of stuff that a person has figured out that they need. Therefore they've done everything they've had to and they're just focused and calm because they are totally confident and they know what they can do. I think that would be the ideal focus (Athlete 4).*

*I think great focus is having self-confidence but recognizing your limitations. If someone has that, they are confident in their abilities that they've already got but recognize the things they need to work on. (Athlete 5)*

*Someone who has great focus is completely relaxed. At the race they are not fidgeting at all at the start line or jumping around. You can see they're just completely calm and ready to race. They're not running around before the race stressing out about different things. They're just very calm and methodical and ready to race (Athlete 10)*

Great focus was also described by two athlete as similar to Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi's (1999) definition of flow and Orlick's definition of focused connection: a state of connection where one becomes totally absorbed in what one is doing, to the exclusion of all other thoughts and emotions,

*My best performance, I believe I have had such focus that I am actually performing instinctively and subconsciously. If you actually asked what I was thinking I would say my head was empty of thought. When this happens, it is the ultimate focus (Athlete 5).*

*You need to love what you're doing, love mountain biking, enjoy it, and focus on that, focus on the course, focus on being the best you can. If all those things are met then I*

*believe that you can show up and you can attack a course, and be almost like Zen or in the zone where your focus is where you don't hear anything. You don't see anything. You're just following that wheel, or you don't even see that, you just see the course. You don't even see the time. Your ride is completely effortless. The hills aren't even there. That's sort of the perfect focus (Athlete 7).*

So focus comes back to connection with individual goals and how much you want to achieve the goal(s) you are pursuing. Your focus is what guides your energy and your motivation.

### **Questions for reflection:**

How willing are you to focus your day and life in ways that will allow you to fully pursue your personal and performance goals?

How willing are you to be disciplined with your mind, body, eating, preparation, focus, training and sleeping habits?

How committed are you to keep the joy in your pursuits?

Sport offers a wonderful medium for developing positive and effective mental skills for enhancing life. Training and performing in sports (and the performing arts) are among of the best ways to nurture self awareness, self-discipline, joy and high quality focusing skills Through these kinds of activities you are challenged to push your limits, to gain a better understanding of the nature of focus, to find reasons to continue with your pursuit and to overcome many obstacles along the road to developing one's best and most joyful focus.

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