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5 Running a psyching team: Providing mental support at long-distance running events

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ACCEPTED VERSION

13 Abstract

14 Psyching teams provide brief psychological support to participants before, during, and after
15 long distance running events such as marathons. Developed and refined over the past 30
16 years, psyching teams benefit runners themselves, provide mental skills training and hands on
17 experience to team members, and help de-mystify sport psychology. Using one particular
18 model, this article is designed to describe both the content and process of psyching teams and
19 offer information for others' development of similar volunteer programs.

20 *Keywords:* psychological support, marathon, outreach activities

21

22 Running a Psyching Team: Providing mental support at long-distance running events

23 **In the Beginning...**

24 In 1985, after some years of offering advice “on the run” during marathon events, a
25 psychiatrist and psychologist created a “psyching team” for the New York City Marathon
26 (Bloom, 1998). The team recruited local mental health professionals to provide brief,
27 strategic mental skills tips to runners before the race start. Over the years, various methods of
28 assisting runners before, during, and/or after road races have developed, ranging from booths
29 at community events to medical involvement at race conclusion (Hays & Katchen, 2006).
30 Models of recruitment, training, and service have included graduate student-led, sport
31 psychology program-led, and professional psychologist/sport psychologist-led programs (Day
32 et al., 2014). Typically directed by a sport psychology or allied science professional, each of
33 these models varies in where they get their energy, support – financial and otherwise – and
34 practical organization. In the sections that follow, we describe a full-service model that has
35 been developed and refined in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

36 **Purpose of Psyching Teams**

37 Nearly 50 years ago, an American Psychological Association president spoke of the
38 value of “giving psychology away” (Miller, 1969). Psyching teams are designed to give sport
39 psychology away,” that is, to offer mental skills assistance to runners in a public forum.
40 Sometimes, this is at an individual level; in other instances, informal groups or activities
41 create opportunities for large-scale training in mental skills (Day et al., 2014). Beyond this
42 manifest goal, psyching teams offer an opportunity for training, whether of sport psychology
43 students with minimal opportunity to practice what they have been learning at a theoretical
44 level, or to introduce mental health professionals to the field of applied sport psychology
45 (Hays & Katchen, 2006). Because psyching teams are present at public events, there is also
46 an opportunity for increased exposure and de-mystification to the general public of the

47 benefits of sport psychology, whether through websites, public events such as ‘carbo’ dinners
48 where food is served to runners, or social and traditional media (Day et al., 2014).

49 **Intervention Strategies**

50 Sport psychology offers a seemingly unending number of interventions that can be
51 useful for endurance athletes. In all arenas of practice, performance interventions will ideally
52 be matched to the needs of the individual(s) receiving them, as well as the competence of the
53 individual(s) providing them. Organizers of psyching teams have implemented a variety of
54 interventions in an effort to identify the appropriate strategies for the unique settings that are
55 encountered at race expos (an exposition, typically held the day(s) before a race) and starting
56 lines. Many of the interventions are “traditional” mental skills techniques. To sport
57 psychology-trained practitioners, they may appear to be “no-brainer” approaches to brief
58 contact with marathoners. Others are creative takes on strategies that have been demonstrated
59 to be effective in research settings. The following interventions have been used in psyching
60 teams across the world. These strategies have been selected intentionally, taking into account
61 the demands specific to endurance events such as marathon running. For example, long
62 distance runners have reported experiencing relatively high levels of pain and discomfort,
63 wanting to give up, and an increasingly negative attitude as the distance gets greater (Buman,
64 Brewer, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2008; Samson, Simpson, Kamphoff, & Langlier,
65 2015). Although there is limited empirical evidence of sport-specific psychological skills
66 training programs (Birrer & Morgan, 2010), research has demonstrated that psychological
67 skills interventions improve endurance performance (McCormick, Meijen, & Marcora, 2015).
68 An empirical question remains with regard to psyching teams: whether brief, one-time
69 interventions with amateur—often first-time—runners have measurable impact on affective
70 experience or actual performance.

71 Psyching team members receive training in contextually appropriate mental skills.
72 Among the most frequently used mental skills techniques (MST) are strategies that attend to
73 runners' appropriate level of arousal, goal setting, imagery, cognitive strategies, and
74 anchoring. These process-oriented strategies are designed to enhance runners' race
75 experience. Although described one at a time, typically psyching team members may select a
76 couple of techniques most appropriate to the particular situation.

77 **Arousal Management**

78 Many athletes use psyching team members to help them get their "nerves" under
79 control. When speaking to psyching team members, runners regularly describe somatic
80 symptoms of hyperarousal; they may describe themselves as "freaking out," "scared,"
81 "nervous," or "terrified." Arousal management strategies are designed to help athletes gain
82 more control over our bodily functions and responses (e.g., Williams, 2010). Diaphragmatic
83 breathing or other methods of arousal control can be explained for use both in athletic
84 settings as well as in many non-sport settings. Breathing techniques can act as short-term
85 stress relief (Rausch, Gramling, & Auerbach, 2006). Slowing down one's breathing rate
86 assists in slowing down the connected body systems that contribute to the somatic symptoms
87 associated with anxiety or arousal (Hazlett-Stevens & Craske, 2009).

88 Psyching team members will often ask runners about their somatic experience and
89 level of tension. Runners are then presented with a description of the physical systems related
90 to arousal and educated on the impact this can have on both running performance and
91 psychological aspects of the race. Psyching team members then guide the athletes through
92 basic breathing exercises or progressive muscle relaxation. At race expos, a handout
93 description can serve to reinforce and further inform runners. Athletes at a number of races
94 have commented on the significant positive impact they felt this particular intervention had
95 on their race experience (Day et al., 2014; Hays, 2007).

96 Goal Setting

97 Inquiring about marathoners' goals is one way to engage them and also assist in
98 specific and realistic but challenging goal setting (Weinberg & Gould, 2014). At the stage
99 when psyching team members interact with runners, the focus is not about providing
100 education about *how* to set goals, but rather about how to put these goals into race day
101 context. Because runners may approach a race with one "do or die" goal (Scholz, Nagy,
102 Schuz, & Ziegelmann, 2008), they may benefit from developing multiple levels of goals.
103 These may include goals related to the process, such as using strategies to assess and manage
104 pain, or the more obvious outcome goals such as race completion times.

105 When athletes set goals that they are unlikely to attain, underperformance can
106 significantly impact their affective response to the event (Gaudreau, Blondin, & Lapierre,
107 2002). A negative affective response in performance may decrease the likelihood that an
108 athlete would engage in a similar event in the future.

109 A practical application of this concept, well-received by athletes, is the idea of having
110 three different levels of goals for the race. Athletes are asked to identify a dream goal, one
111 that would be achievable under perfect conditions. Next they think of a goal with which they
112 could be happy if things go less than perfectly for them. And finally, they identify an
113 acceptable goal, the bare minimum they could leave the race satisfied with if things do not go
114 as expected on race day. Setting these three goals can help to control negative thoughts or
115 feelings of disappointment both during and after the race.

116 Imagery

117 Imagery, defined as creating or re-creating experiences in the mind (Vealey &
118 Greenleaf, 2010), is another intervention implemented during psyching team interactions.
119 Imagery can be used to help direct a runner's attention or to supplement many of the other
120 strategies discussed. Using imagery as an intervention has been shown to increase self-

121 confidence related to performance (Hall et al., 2009; Hammond, Gregg, Hrycaiko, Mactavish,
122 & Leslie-Toogood, 2012). The less experienced the athlete is with imagery, the greater
123 impact its use may have on confidence (Hall et al., 2009).

124 Imagery as a psychological strategy can be challenging to teach due to the short time
125 available with participants; it is therefore helpful to identify or build on a participant's
126 experience with the use of imagery, to keep the imagery simple, and to respond to the
127 participant's symbolic language. Even though the research literature may be equivocal
128 regarding the effectiveness of associative compared with dissociative cognitive strategies
129 (Brick, MacIntyre, & Campbell, 2014), for first-time marathoners—often the runners who
130 make use of psyching team services—just knowing that they can shift from one to the other
131 can be useful. A psyching team member might talk a participant through imagining running
132 with a smooth stride (an associative strategy), perhaps with an aural (“smooth”) cue as well
133 as the visual/kinaesthetic sensation. A more dissociative strategy to distract from feeling
134 worried might be imagining a calm sea to help feel calmer at the start of the race. Developing
135 specific images (visual, phrases, words) at particular cue spots or at pre-determined distance
136 markers can also help participants meet the challenges of the race.

137 Physical pain is a component of distance running of concern to many new runners.
138 Imagery related to pain management can be particularly useful for runners (Munroe,
139 Giacobbi, Hall, & Weinberg, 2000) to help them prepare for dealing with pain or discomfort.
140 At the same time, the psyching team member should emphasize the importance of
141 maintaining some awareness regarding pain that signals the need to modify one's running
142 pace.

143 **Cognitive Strategies**

144 “Self-talk,” that is, the ways in which one creates an inner dialogue with oneself, is a
145 critical component of MST, especially in endurance events such as marathons. Although

146 athletes may be able to think of positive self-talk statements on demand, distance events
147 frequently require different self-talk strategies than do shorter tasks (Van Raalte, Morrey,
148 Cornelius, & Brewer, 2015). Running-task related self-talk, whether motivational or
149 instructional, appears to be more effective than neutral self-talk (see Bertollo et al., 2015;
150 Hamilton, Scott, & MacDougall, 2007) or no self-talk (Miller & Donohue, 2003).

151 Motivational self-talk can be helpful for gross motor skill tasks such as running
152 (Theodorakis, Weinberg, Natsis, Douma, & Kazakas, 2000). Both motivational and
153 instructional self-talk can be beneficial in reducing ratings of perceived effort and controlling
154 emotions in endurance events (Barwood, Corbett, Wagstaff, McVeigh, & Thelwell, 2015;
155 Blanchfield, Hardy, de Morree, Staiano, & Marcora, 2014). Research findings (Van Raalte et
156 al., 2015) as well as observational and anecdotal information (Day et al., 2014) note that
157 marathon runners mostly use motivational self-talk during marathons.

158 In assisting runners to develop motivational self-talk, it is important to help them
159 identify positive motivational statements that are relevant to them and within their control.
160 Short phrases such as “keep going” or “I can beat this hill” can be beneficial. Emotion-related
161 words such as “smile” can also be helpful in controlling negative emotions. Some researchers
162 have even suggested that deliberately smiling can result in more positive affect and feelings
163 of exertion compared to frowning (Philippen, Bakker, Oudejans, & Canal-Bruland, 2012).

164 Although motivational strategies are useful, instructional self-talk may also be
165 relevant. Using “running form”-related phrases such as “smooth stride” or “steady pace” can
166 help runners focus on their race, in the present moment.

167 No matter how well prepared one is, distance events, especially for those who do not
168 have much experience with them, can seem daunting, especially just prior to the race as well
169 as during the race. Both rational discourse and logistical assurance can be important in
170 managing these worries.

171 Psyching team members often assist runners in differentiating the aspects of the race
172 that they do and do not have control over. Reminders of their training experience, course
173 knowledge, or plans regarding pacing are all “controllables.” On the other hand, weather,
174 other athlete traffic, unanticipated physical symptoms, or unforeseen issues on course are
175 “uncontrollable.” Expecting the unexpected and maintaining acceptance throughout the race
176 are cognitive skills that athletes can learn.

177 Psyching team members should anticipate that runners—and particularly first-
178 timers—may worry about what to expect on race day. It is therefore important for psyching
179 team members to familiarize themselves with race details prior to the event. This may include
180 reviewing the race course information to learn things like locations of water stops or whether
181 there are pace teams at the event. Similarly, on race morning psyching team members are
182 encouraged to arrive early enough to find the portable toilets, corrals, and bag drop at race
183 start. Being able to answer these questions helps to reduce the anxieties that runners may
184 experience the morning of the race.

185 **Anchoring: “Going to the Well” and Symbolic Reminders**

186 Psyching teams’ brief interventions often emphasize or build on runners’ own
187 strengths or capabilities to support self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Runners may be invited to
188 “go to the well” of their own experience, recalling how they have best handled similar
189 challenges in the past. Athletes who are new to an event may find it difficult to feel confident
190 in their training and preparation. They are more likely to follow the pace of others rather than
191 relying on their own training pace. Starting too fast due to the presence of other runners can
192 interfere with subsequent performance (Renfree & St Clair Gibson, 2013). Emphasizing the
193 importance of trusting one’s training and focusing on running one’s own race can be a key
194 concept to reinforce with newer athletes. One strategy to assist runners in trusting their
195 training is to ask them for successes they achieved during their training that they may not

196 have believed they could do. Discussing these successes brings these positive memories to
197 the forefront, thus “anchoring” runners’ sense of self and increasing runners’ confidence in
198 their abilities. Imagery is often an important component as well: recalling the past in order to
199 anticipate the future.

200 Runners also are often eager to pin on small pieces of fluorescent plastic tape or race
201 colored ribbon that are described as pieces of the finish line. This anchoring method, unique
202 to psyching teams, was initially developed for research purposes, to identify runners who had
203 spoken to members of the psyching team (Hays, personal communication, 2014). Over the
204 years, however, finish line ribbons have evolved into a key part of the tool box of psyching
205 teams. Often at the conclusion of an intervention, the psyching team member offers this piece
206 of ribbon, helping the athlete make use of it as a method of recalling the key points of the
207 intervention (Hays & Katchen, 2006). The use of this type of symbolic reference is similar to
208 some charity races in which participants wear a ribbon or write down the name of someone
209 they are running for to remember their reasons for running and to help them through the
210 difficult parts of the race (for example see King, 2003). Alternatively, some psyching teams
211 have used plastic wrist bands in a distinctive color, encouraging the runner to write a key
212 word or phrase on the band.

213 **Psyching Team Structure**

214 Although all psyching teams have many of the same goals, each psyching team has
215 unique elements that are a function of, among other things: the particular race course, types
216 of participants, the interests and strengths of the psyching team director and members, and the
217 interests and support provided by the race director and race organization (Day et al., 2014).

218 **Before the Race**

219 Examples of the types of services offered before the race include free workshops for
220 participants, whether in the months preceding the race or during the race expo. These

221 workshops or other MST techniques can also be offered via social media, such as blogs,
222 Facebook, Instagrams, Twitter or as a webinar. Many psyching teams are available during the
223 race expo, providing both relevant written materials as well as the opportunity for one-on-one
224 interventions. Pasta Dinners, often held the evening before a race, can give another
225 opportunity for an invited speaker to describe, teach, or review essential MST for the
226 following day.

227 **During the Race**

228 The “classic” psyching team MST interventions occur at race start, where participants
229 may be waiting with increasing tension for the race start. In some races, “psychs on bikes”
230 are available at strategic points along the race course to assist runners at some of the more
231 challenging spots on the course, such as steep hills or the area around Mile 18 or so where
232 severe fatigue (aka “The Wall”) may set in. Psyching team members may also be deployed
233 especially toward the end of the race course, to walk or run with participants who are
234 struggling with the final few miles. These on-course activities occur *only* with the support
235 and approval of the race organization and the others, such as bike marshals, who are needed
236 on the course for reasons of safety.

237 **Race Finish**

238 Some psyching teams are integrated into the medical tent as one element of the
239 medical team. Their role may such disparate elements as cognitive assessment, support for
240 recovery, management of thwarted expectations, or engagement with families concerned
241 about a loved one’s condition. Psyching team members may also help runners as they leave
242 the finish line chute and begin processing their race goals and performance.

243 **Developing a Psyching Team**

244 As the concept of psyching teams gains popularity, so does the idea of starting one for
245 a particular race. This enthusiasm is often contagious, but without considering some of the

246 established best practices, success can be limited. Although details can vary based on selected
247 race, the following aspects are among those that appear to be most critical for building a
248 successful marathon psyching team.

249 **Selecting a Race**

250 Selecting the right race in the right city is imperative to the success of a psyching
251 team. Among relevant considerations, potential psyching team directors should develop plans
252 regarding access to a particular race as well as the logistical aspects of incorporating a
253 psyching team into that race.

254 Race directors are the gate keepers to the race, the ones who will give psyching team
255 members access to athletes or prevent that access. The number one barrier to launching a
256 successful marathon psyching team is resistance from the executive staff of the race.
257 Likewise, their appreciation of the “value added” engagement of a psyching team becomes
258 the foundation for successful incorporation of a psyching team into a particular race.

259 In order to “sell” the idea to a race director, a psyching team director must be
260 adequately prepared to describe what a psyching team is and how it can benefit athletes and
261 their race experience. If possible, it helps to have or create a connection to the race director.
262 Executive race staff members will have many questions about this new concept. Consulting
263 with longstanding psyching team founders and members (see www.psychingteams.com) can
264 provide adequate information to answer those questions in order to get that much needed
265 “let’s do this” from a race director. It is better for a psyching team to start small, with a few
266 useful services that are appreciated, than to proffer a wide range that cannot be fully
267 accomplished. This enables incremental growth, based on observational learning and
268 feedback from team members, race staff, and runners.

269 An ideal “mature” psyching team offers interventions available to the athletes at
270 multiple points through the process. This includes the race expo (or identified packet pickup

271 location), the corrals at the starting area of the race, at important designated points along the
272 race course, and at the finish line area of the race. Different strategies, as identified above, are
273 useful at different stages of the race.

274 All psyching team volunteers need to be aware of the health and safety issues that
275 come with the course. It may not be safe, for example, to run along with the participants at
276 certain parts of the course. Being able to communicate with the executive staff on race day is
277 essential. We recommend that race organizers include psyching team directors in their risk
278 assessment plans before the event.

279 **Recruitment, Selection, and Training of Psyching Team Members**

280 Psyching teams that are led by professional psychologists or sport psychologists
281 function most effectively by recruiting and selecting mental health professionals, sport
282 psychologists, and graduate students in these fields. Training, whether on site or at a distance,
283 should include, minimally: training in brief MST methods, an opportunity for practice, and
284 logistical information. If logistics precludes on-site training, workshops can be held via
285 Skype or through online video. In addition, the psyching team director needs to ensure that
286 team members have key logistical information, such as course details, road closures, meeting
287 location, starting times, as well as safety details. First time psyching team organizers may
288 also find the podcasts on the psyching teams website (www.psychingteams.com) helpful.

289 The development of a sense of “team” is critical to smooth functioning; it can be
290 augmented by insignia and visible indicators of team membership (e.g., labelled caps, t-shirts,
291 jackets). During training, practice, and actual interventions, it is helpful to pair up less
292 experienced psyching team with more experienced practitioners to ensure that appropriate
293 care is provided to runners.

294 **Evaluation and Recommendations for Future Psyching Teams**

295 Considering the presence of psyching teams at long distance events in the United
296 States, Canada, and Europe it is clear that there is a demand for and appreciation of the
297 services provided by psyching teams. The issues that psyching teams encounter when
298 speaking to participants vary widely, as does the physical and psychological skill level of the
299 runners who make use of the support provided by the psyching team. Psychological support
300 at mass participation events provides specific skills that runners can use. Further, psyching
301 teams offer training and practice to participating team members and serve to de-mystify the
302 process of psychological support for optimal performance. Self-report feedback, from
303 runners, psyching team members, and race staff indicates a high degree of appreciation for
304 these services.

305 We recommend that potential psyching team directors obtain initial experience by
306 participating in an established psyching team and make use of current information about
307 psyching teams. Starting small, recruiting well, obtaining feedback, and building
308 incrementally on success will all be useful in the establishment and maintenance of a
309 psyching team. There is also great potential for adapting this psyching team model to other
310 popular events such as bike racing or triathlons.

311

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