

Sailing success may not be winning*

You win when you get absorbed in a race and sail well, regardless of the outcome, says Michael Blackburn.

Every Saturday in summer when I was 16 I felt nervous and excited while getting my boat ready for a club race on Lake Burley Griffin. The nerves came about because sometimes it seemed the outcome of the race was more important than participating and having fun.

Still today, there is the perennial post-race question 'How did you go?', almost as if your value as a person is influenced by your performance in the pretty arbitrary task of maneuvering a boat with sails around a course.

For ages I hated hearing that question because what I was learning at Uni about sports psychology taught me to focus on the process rather than the outcome. "Focus on the elements of completing the task and the outcome will take care of itself." If I kept thinking about 'winning', (or worse, 'loosing') how could my mind be free enough to sort out the complex set of variables that must be considered when deciding tactics and strategy?

The mind can only do so much at one time and if it's clouded with unnecessary thoughts, or too many ideas, performance will suffer. (See also the MP3, [Dealing with Distractions](#))

However, it's not easy to stop thinking about something; just as the more you try to go to sleep, the less likely you'll nod off – you just have to relax and let it happen.

Rather than trying not to think about being anxious, I started to try filling my mind with the things that mattered, and gradually, there was less room in my head for distractions.

I could be relieved in the fact that I didn't have to consciously try to win a sailing race in order to do well. But I did have to consciously try to fill my mind with good thoughts about what needed to be done at each stage of a race.

So my advice is that during the contest you simply need to get absorbed in the experience, be in the present and trust your body. You've sailed and raced a bit before, no doubt, so use what you have learnt and let your body do what you've trained it to do (assuming your training is on track!).

Accordingly, before a race try to occupy your mind with information which has to do with performing your best. Make all the normal checks – the bias on the line, wind direction, transits from both ends of the start line, current, wave effects, top mark position, the position of other marks and starting mark laylines.

Set up your boat for those conditions – vang, outhaul, cunningham, traveller and so on. At the same time keep assessing the wind and what it is likely to do during the race. Start to get a feel for what is happening and try to fill your mind with the relevant information. In particular, try to identify what will enable you to get clear air at the start, sail fast and look around in the first 100m to confirm the best way to go up the first beat.

Now this may sound pretty easy now you're sitting down reading this magazine. But putting it in practice on the water is a bigger challenge when you can be distracted by the range of things you have to consider. Then there are the indeterminable factors like what the wind is going to do next and who's going to stuff you up.

Of course, the point I'm getting to is that your mental performance – decision making, the execution of skills, arousal control and so on – contributes most to the outcome of a race. So what mental training do you do?

Studies on elite athletes found that they felt they could have reached the top much sooner if they had worked on strengthening their mental skills earlier in their careers. Some mentioned they had had the same technical and physical skills honed to perfection four years before becoming world champions, but they had not yet learned how to hold their best focus in important competitions. These athletes said that it was not until their focusing skills were refined and enhanced that their dreams became a reality.

Mental preparation needn't take a lot of time, maybe a few minutes a week. You may already do some ad-hoc training of your mind skills. For instance, when you think about tacking, you might naturally see and feel yourself going through the actions. However, some systematic work will really see you advance.

Mental preparation truly starts to pay off when a big regatta is just around the corner. There are many things you can do to prepare yourself mentally for a big event and with some trial and error you'll find a process that puts you in a good frame of mind more often than it doesn't.

Something I did years ago was to voice a series of tracks onto audio cassette. The tracks led me through things like imagery of racing, reminders about dealing with distractions, arousal control as well as some dialogue on the outcome versus performance focus. I took this tape overseas and it really helped my focus in the weeks and days before big events.

I get sick of listening to myself after a while, so I mixed in some favourite music as well. You can listen to some updated samples of the mental preparation tracks I'm talking about at www.sportsmindskills.com.

As Dr Stuart Walker says, above all, aim to do the simple things in sailboat racing well. Consider that just five things matter: strategy, boat speed, boat-handling, tactics and psychology. A desire to do these five things well often results in winning. The desire to win rarely results in sailing well. So, at the end of a race ask yourself, "How well did I sail?"

Published in *Australian Sailing*, July 2007. [Sailing Mind Skills](#) is available as a digital download or CD from www.sportsmindskills.comTM