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Focus on Cues Provide by Body when running

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Long distance runners are frequently asked, "What do you think about when you are running? Don't you get bored?"

Sports scientists have asked this question and concluded that competitive runners think about either what is going on in their body or things outside their body.

The two mental strategies are called associative thinking and disassociative thinking. Both can enhance performance, but associative thinking has a greater reward. Disassociative thinking or disassociation involves ignoring the sensory feedback the body provides while focusing on something outside the body.

Examples include daydreaming, performing mental calculations and solving work problems. This can enhance performance by distracting the athlete from unpleasant sensations, allowing him or her to run longer.

Associative thinking or association involves concentrating on the physical feelings and sensations being experienced, such as muscle tightness, breathing rate and fatigue.

When Joan Benoit Samuelson ran in the first Olympic women's marathon, she presented a fine example of associative thinking. Her eyes and mind were deeply focused on cues her body was providing.

Research confirms that elite athletes tend to use associative thinking a great deal, while novice runners tend to use diassociative thinking. Association is clearly a strategy that can increase the ability to handle strenuous workouts and cope with tough races.

The typical runner associates 30 percent to 40 percent of the time. As effort and performance increase, the frequency of associative thinking can increase to 60 percent to 90 percent. Studies substantiate that the

frequency of associative thinking can be increased with training.

Whether a novice runner or veteran elite runner, mental preparation is just as important if not more important than physical.

Long periods of intense concentration rarely occur in typical activities of daily living. A typical school class lasts 45 to 50 minutes, and many of those minutes are spent daydreaming. Work is interrupted with coffee breaks, telephone calls and various activities. Associative thinking can be taxing. Mental fatigue can occur like physical fatigue. Mental fatigue can be forestalled with training, just as physical fatigue can be forestalled with conditioning. Some days training should focus on mental practice, with the goal of increasing the frequency of associative thoughts and refining the associative thoughts from general to specific.

Prepare for workouts and remind yourself to think less about distractions.