

Mental Toughness

Pain...“Be Willing”

Pain is ever-present in sport. An athlete's ability to tolerate pain is essential to success. But what kind of pain are we talking about? How much pain is safe to ignore? How do you get past it? The answers are below.

First, we must define the different types of pain you can experience:

Fatigue and discomfort. This is an unpleasant feeling produced by effort, but not strong enough to be labeled “pain.” Athletes learn to be “comfortable being uncomfortable”, as such efforts are a regular and necessary part of most sports. With continued effort, discomfort can turn into ...

Positive training pain. This pain often occurs with endurance exercise, and includes muscle fatigue and sensations in the lungs and heart that can range from unpleasant to what is typically thought of as pain. It is not threatening, however, as athletes know the cause, are in control of their effort, and recognize that these feelings are beneficial and can enhance performance. In short, positive training pain is a good sign of effort and improvement.

Negative training pain is still non-threatening, but goes beyond positive signs of training benefit. An example may be extreme soreness that lasts for days. There may be an overtraining risk.

Negative warning pain is similar to negative training pain, with the added element of threat. It may be a new experience of pain and a sign of injury occurring. It typically occurs gradually, and allows the athlete to evaluate potential training causes and respond appropriately.

Negative acute pain is an intense and specific pain that occurs suddenly, often a result of injury. It is often localized to a specific body part and is labeled as threatening.

Numbness is rare but of very serious concern. It is when the athlete feels nothing when soreness, fatigue or pain should be felt. Instead, limbs are numb. This may be a sign of serious injury or pushing one's body past its physical limits.

We will focus on performance pain and save negative injury pains for another issue.

Ignoring pain is often OK when it first appears, or during recovery bike rides or runs. It is not helpful to ignore pain during quality effort, however. This is because pain is essential and valuable information about your effort and performance. It also may be an appropriate warning for your body. Ignoring pain long term can be ineffective and harmful, as you lose information about your pacing and potential injury status.

How you *react to your pain* is more important than the experience of pain itself. If you interpret your pain as threatening and something to be avoided, or you focus on the pain and fight it rather than concentrate on your sport, the pain will increase and interfere with your performance. On the other hand, if you view pain as something that is natural and necessary and interpret it as a sign that you are working hard and achieving your goals then your pain can be an ally. Many athletes find that recognizing that they are not alone in their pain is helpful. The other athletes playing with them also hurt, and the challenge of tolerating your pain better than your opponent adds to the competition. In addition, athletes often report great satisfaction after persevering through a painful training session or competition.

Finally, accepting the reality that pain is a part of training and competition may be most helpful. You cannot perform at a high level and not experience pain. Comfort and performance excellence are mutually exclusive. You cannot have them both. Prior to exercise, decide just how much pain you are *willing* to experience to achieve your goals. When pain shows up, be *willing* to feel fully as part of your experience. Let your pain be in service of your greater goal. You may be surprised to find your pain *suffering* will be lessened when you allow pain to be a part of sport.

More on injury and rehabilitation pain at a later date (you are not advised to push through injury pain) ... but until then, "Be Willing."

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