



FAST FEET WILL GET YOU ONLY SO FAR. TO RACE WELL, YOU'VE GOT TO TRAIN YOUR BRAIN BY JENNIFER PIRTLE

# Head Start

ALTHOUGH George Dieffenbach had been running seriously for 23 years, the Boston Marathon always eluded his reach. After several attempts to qualify, he decided to try a different tack. "I realized I'd been overlooking the mental side of my training," says Dieffenbach, 52. At home in Pittsburgh, he began studying psychological techniques described in books by Hal Higdon and Jeff Galloway, and enlisted the help of a mental trainer to help him visualize the process of running and not stress about the outcome.

His efforts paid off: In 2002 Dieffenbach qualified for and ran the Boston Marathon—and has done so every year since. This year, he competed in the U.S. Senior Olympics. "Without using trigger words and mental tricks to stay strong and positive, I don't think I would have achieved these goals," he says.

Runners are realizing the role the mind plays in performance. Some elite runners now employ two trainers: one to help prep their body and another to train their brain. Collegiate and recreational runners are also starting to take advantage of this expertise. The two-pronged approach makes sense, says James Bauman, Ph.D., a U.S.

Olympic Committee sport psychologist. "You might have lots of race potential. But without training your mind, you won't tap it." Here's how to prime your mind for competition.

## Prerace Prep

**EXAMINE PAST PERFORMANCE** "I ask runners to describe their best and worst

races,” says Greg Dale, Ph.D., a mental training coach in the athletic department at Duke University. “I want to know what they did when they ran really well and what they did when they didn’t. We look for patterns that can teach us what helps and hurts their performances.”

**MAKE A RACE PLAN** Setting mini-goals you can achieve mid-race—like running even splits—will help lessen the burden of an ultimate goal such as PRing, says Dale. Run or drive the course in advance, looking for landmarks to use to your advantage: *When I get to the playground, I’ll pick up the pace.*

**UNDERSTAND YOUR EMOTIONS** A first-time marathoner might be afraid of not finishing the race, while an experienced runner might feel anxious when he sees his rival. Whatever your fear, acknowledging its universality can help lessen its impact on your performance. “The emotions connected with competition are something all runners experience,” says Bauman. “Discussing or writing about your fears can help you process them,” he says. “Understanding the fears can lead to a cognitive shift: It can be positive, for example, to be a little excited before a race rather than feeling dread.”

**PLAN FOR POSITIVITY** “When runners are hurting or tired, they’ll often start thinking *I can’t do it or I’ll never finish,*” says Aimee Kimball, Ph.D., director of mental training at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center’s Center for Sports Medicine. To keep it positive, choose a trigger word or phrase to call up while you run. One of Kimball’s runners picked *gazelle*. “This graceful image is how he sees himself when he’s running at his best,” she says. One of Dieffenbach’s key words is *arms*, which he focuses on toward the end of a long race. “If I keep my arms moving swiftly,

## Visual Art

**YOU’VE HEARD THAT USING MENTAL IMAGERY CAN HELP your race results, but how exactly do you paint a picture of success? Kate Hays, Ph.D., director of the “Psyching Team” for the Toronto International Marathon and owner of The Performing Edge, a sports-psychology practice, offers three ways to improve your visualization skills.**

### 1 TAKE AN INSIDE-OUT APPROACH

When you imagine your body running, take an internal perspective. Before a race, think about how your muscles feel when they’re climbing a steep hill, or how they feel when you’re tired and you still have a mile to go. “Getting your mind prepared for those sensations will help you handle them on race day,” Hays says.

### 2 VISUALIZE HELPFUL PROPS

If you are uncomfortable running across bridges, imagine that you’ve sprouted wings that will carry you across or that there’s a red carpet unrolled over the length of the bridge, Hays says. When all of your energy seems tapped, picture an imaginary rope pulling you toward the runner in front of you.

### 3 INCLUDE ADDITIONAL SENSES

Tuning into your other senses provides more dramatic results, Hays says. If you get anxious before a race, for example, you can imagine sensations that have a calming effect on you, such as “feeling” a cool ocean breeze. During a rough patch in a race, you could “hear” a loved one giving you a pep talk.

my legs will do the same,” he explains. Or try music: Singing a few lines of your favorite song (out loud or in your head) can provide a boost.

**IMAGINE YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS** “Picture yourself in a challenging situation, such as climbing a hill,” Kimball suggests. “Then imagine responding the way you want to, perhaps by focusing on specific body parts—keep your head up, stay on your toes.” Repeating this image in your mind, especially just before you fall asleep at night, will help it become automatic. (For more on using imagery, see “Visual Art,” above.)

**LEARN TO RELAX** Also before bedtime, tense and relax each muscle group, from your feet to your face. (Spend 10 seconds tensing each body part, then 10 seconds releasing.) Knowing how your muscles feel in each state will help you recognize and release tension on race day.

## Race-Day Strategy

**CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF** Try to get rid of any lingering all-or-nothing Big

Race anxiety by using the relaxation techniques you’ve practiced in training. Inhale strength and confidence through your nose and exhale nervousness and tension through your mouth.

**KEEP YOUR BRAIN BUSY** Repeat your trigger word to yourself, write it on your arm as a reminder, or have your friends shout it out as you run past. When he’s tired, Dieffenbach counts every time his left foot hits the pavement. When he reaches the number 50, he switches to his right foot. “Counting footsteps helps me stay in the moment without dwelling on the pain I feel,” he explains.

**CREATE A HAPPY ENDING** After the race, evaluate how well you stuck to your plan. Focusing on what you achieved can help you refine your strategy for next time and feel successful, even if you were disappointed in the final outcome. “If you didn’t run your best race, give yourself 10 minutes to pout, then move on,” advises Kimball. “Remember, you run to add to your quality of life; don’t let it negatively affect it, too.” **RW**