

MIND GAMES:

A Basic Primer on Sports Psychology for the Racing Sailor

by Jim Young



Jim Young (right) with Randy Smyth (center) and Jay Glaser, who dominated the '81 and '82 Tornado Worlds, the '81 and '82 Olympic Classes Regattas and the '82 Europeans.

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Jim is the Director of the USOYC Sports Medicine program, his pet project being the upgrading of coaching in sailing. He brings a wealth of experience from his active involvement as both competitor and certified coach in the U.S. Nordic skiing program. He is a five-time Butterfly national champion, and has racing experience in Lasers to catamarans to One Tonners. As Tornado class coach since 1981 he has been instrumental in the U.S. domination of that class. And he is the Assistant Team Leader for the '83 U.S. Pan Am Team.

Someone once said, "Winners don't win; it's the losers who lose." As I've traveled the world racing and coaching these words have never left me, and I've found them to be true over and over in this sport of ours. Examples of sailors who defeat themselves before the racing even begins are those who let others psych them out in the parking lot with "magic bottom juices," etc., who change all their rigging at the last minute trying to copy the "fast guys," and who spend their pre-race time yelling at the race committee and their crew, and staring at the other boats getting ready.

In racing, your goal is to go as fast as possible and in the right direction... and the single most important element for success is *concentration*. Anything which detracts from your concentration will simply make you go slower and sail less smart.

Are you in control of what you are doing and feeling during a regatta? Let's go through a simple self-evaluation test:

- 1.) Can you avoid becoming nervous before an event?
- 2.) Can you maintain concentration after a mistake, either yours or someone else's?
- 3.) Do you rarely get frustrated?
- 4.) Can you maintain emotional control throughout a regatta?
- 5.) Can you stay motivated when behind?

This is not a complete list, but once you are able to honestly answer these kinds of questions, you are on the way to learning more about yourself, and the many ways that you consciously and subconsciously may weaken your own concentration. From that point you are on the road towards improving your own performance.

The biggest single factor in maintaining concentration is the ability to relax. Most of the bad feelings you get in a race are negative reactions to stress. There are many techniques that can be used to reduce stress, but the common key to all these methods is the ability to relax and to defuse stress before it affects your performance.

Relaxation is a skill, and like your other skills it must be learned and practiced until it becomes automatic. Some are just naturally unflappable; others at the opposite extreme must learn the skill of relaxation from an experienced teacher. The various relaxation skills can be divided into two areas: mental and physical. Mental relaxation techniques include hypnosis, biofeedback and meditation, while the physical techniques include massage, stretching, progressive relaxation exercises and just plain exercise such as running, bicycling or swimming.

Taking a look at some of the very best sailors, we see they are usually relaxed and calm, and that they get their jobs done without a lot of noise and the burning intensity that is often seen in those close to, but not at, the top. Jay Glaser and Randy Smyth, two excellent examples, are now blowing the socks off everyone in catamarans; not because of any tricks or technical superiority, but because of higher levels of concentration. There is perhaps no better team in yachting today. Each has total confidence in the other, allowing them to maintain concentration on their own jobs and to keep their combined attention focused on one goal—making the boat go fast. Another big factor in their speed is not letting off-the-water distractions such as food, housing and boat transportation, etc., get out of control and upset their routine. For this they have wisely accepted help from others.

If you answered an honest "yes" or "usually" to most of the questions, then a simple relaxation program, based on self-awareness of your few problem areas, will probably be effective. If your negative reactions to stress appear during the race, then a simple mental program which reminds you to "shut up, relax and sail the boat," can be effective. If your stress problems occur on shore, it's easy to add a simple physical activity, such as a regular morning run or swim, to help reduce the daily stress buildup.

If you have a lot of "no" or "not often" answers, you might begin with some reading. Most recommended is *In Pursuit of Excellence* by Terry Orlick, published in the U.S. by Human Kinetics Publishers, Champaign, IL. Sports Psychology is a rapidly expanding field, generating lots of good new books and articles, and the availability of trained sports psychologists to help athletes to better understand themselves and to remove the mental barriers to performance that exist in all our heads. If after doing some reading you still are feeling out of control, you might consider talking to a sports psychologist, either at a local university or sports association, who can develop a program for you based on your own personal needs and problems.

Here are some practical guidelines for everyone to help reduce stress:

- Don't hurry. Give yourself lots of time to get everything done, whether it's arriving at the regatta site to register, rig and measure in, or to launch before a day's race. Think ahead so your jobs are done smoothly and efficiently, giving yourself time to relax while everyone else generates excess stomach acid.
- Don't worry about things you can't control, i.e., the weather, the race committee, the regatta site, etc. Everyone in the event has to sail with the same problem, and the winner will still be the one who sails the best.
- Keep things that you *can* control, under control. Get plenty of sleep, eat well and be sure you and the boat are prepared.
- Don't brood. This is of supreme importance. Once a mistake is made, forget it! It doesn't matter if it's your own bad tack, a port-tack boat that knocks you head to wind, or the world's worst starting line. Once it's over, leave it behind and try to relax and concentrate on sailing the best possible race you can.

Remember, learning to relax and concentrate is a skill which must be practiced. At a regatta, both on land and during the race, continually ask yourself if you are concentrating 100% on making the boat go fast and in the right direction. If anything is distracting you, notice the cause of the distraction and make an effort to eliminate it. It is only after you have mastered the skill of eliminating all distractions that you can begin to sail at the peak of your potential.