

## **Psychological Advice for Racing Sailors**

*Dr. Jerry May, one of America's most respected sports psychologists, shares his insights on how you can improve your performance and have more fun too.*

### **Speed & Smarts: From a psychological point of view, what are the tough challenges that sailors face when competing in their sport?**

*Jerry May:* One of the main issues is setting goals. You need to ask yourself what is your motivation for being out there – is it to play and have fun? Is it to master a skill? Is it to compete at a higher level? Without a sense of purpose, most athletes will feel unfulfilled. Another problem for sailors is knowing how to prepare themselves mentally. How do you stay in focus? How do you get “up” for a race without getting too tense or anxious?

### **Those are good questions. How would you answer them?**

Well, we know that an athlete who is under-motivated will tend not to perform well. Similarly, an athlete who is over-aroused and trying too hard won't perform as well either. By arousal I mean stress, excitement, anxiety, motivation . . . perhaps all of these things mixed together. It's important to have a certain minimum amount of arousal or you will be uninterested. But you don't want too much or you'll get too wound up.

It's the task of each athlete to understand what is their best motivational level. Somewhere in the middle range, arousal can be experienced as a flow where everything is in sync. When they experience this automatic sensation, I recommend to athletes that they periodically stop and try to recognize how they developed that experience.

### **Let me ask about a specific example. What can you do when you're so nervous before a race that your stomach is turning over?**

Competitive people are going to feel anxiety on the day of competition, and in fact, this may actually help them get up to the optimum arousal level. So you don't necessarily want to eliminate it. Accept that this is how you get ready for a race.

However, if you feel the amount of arousal is interfering with your performance – for example, you can't concentrate on getting your boat ready, or you're much too tense and tight on the starting line – then you need to do something.

What we teach athletes to do is first to identify it, and then choose one of several coping methods. One technique is simple relaxation, which requires teaching the body how to relax. Most of us have spent a lot of time teaching our bodies how to be tense. But when we say to the body “Relax,” that's not something most of us have learned. What we can do is train the brain to tell the muscles to relax. There are many books and tapes about relaxation techniques. They do work, and it is possible to learn how to relax. The goal is to practice relaxing so you are able to calm yourself down to the appropriate level.

### **So the idea is to control your psychological state, rather than be at the mercy of your feelings?**

Yes, exactly. In fact, most of what we teach in sports psychology are self-control techniques. You can't control things like the wind, but you can control how you prepare to handle the wind. The idea is to be prepared as much as possible in the areas where you have control. And you must realize that the joy of sport comes from having a certain balance between things you can and can't control.

Every sport is result-oriented. In other words, you measure your success with results. The problem is that human brains have the unique capacity to look way into the future and way into the past. That's usually good, except if we're on the race course and the only thing we care about is results, then we're not paying attention to the tasks at hand.

At every level, athletes need to keep their ultimate goals in mind, but they have to focus on immediate tasks. If you master each small task, then you will get to your bigger goal. We all know this intellectually, but we forget it, especially in a complex sport like sailing.

### **What should you do when you feel, "I'm not good enough"?**

If you only think you're good when you get a good result, you're in trouble because you have to wait for the result before you can feel good about yourself. What I try to do is get people to pay attention to the little improvements, and then the bigger result comes. I've coached athletes who are ranked third in the world, yet think they are worthless unless they're number one.

Sailing is a sport for perfectionists, and perfectionists rarely are satisfied. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to sail perfectly. We can strive to do this, but we can't hold up perfection as our measure of whether we are successful or not. When that happens, we question our self-esteem too much.

### **So what can a sailor do about this?**

One technique I use for this is called "Stop – think." This is a three-step process that works when you have a repeated thought such as "I'm not any good." It's a simple conditioning technique. The first thing you do is say "Stop."

The second step is to produce a positive image in your mind of something very peaceful and not related to sailing. For me, it's sitting on my deck in the mountains and smelling the freshness of the air. That acts as a positive reward for the word stop. Third, you get up and do something else. If you repeat this enough, particularly steps one and two, pretty soon the negative thoughts will go away.

### **What is the best way to proceed if you get far behind in a race and you feel very discouraged?**

It's important for athletes to be able to recover from what I call "perceived failures." "We'll never catch up" is a perceived failure because you haven't really failed. Competitive athletes tend to get into these feelings a lot, and what we need is ways of coming back from them.

Sailing is a great sport because once you make a mistake you can choose either to stick with that mistake and beat yourself up psychologically or come right back and say, “OK, we’re going to hit the next shift right on.” The specific task is to recover. For example, if you’ve made a tactical error, correct it and immediately get into the present and do what you need to do. Don’t sit in the past. What you need to do is constantly re-focus a little bit ahead of where you are.

One of the ways of doing this is simply focusing on the sensation of speed and sailing. This helps get you out of your head so you aren’t thinking about the past. Whenever you’re not feeling so great, try to bring the fun back into it.

**Do you have any other tips on how competitive sailors can get the most enjoyment while they’re racing?**

I am now convinced that fun is one of the most critical factors in high-level sports. Fun is a sensation, and it’s something you can, and should, practice while you are training. Sometime during your practice sessions just focus on the exhilaration, fun, speed and the feeling of being out on the water. Get in touch with these sensations and feelings. If you don’t do this in practice, you won’t be able to do it very well in a race.

The other thing is that fun shouldn’t come only from sailing. You must do other things for enjoyment. I call this “multi-tracking,” and it gives you a source of balance in your life. If you only do one thing, then you’ll have very few coping mechanisms that say you’re OK. If you look at the best athletes in the world, they usually excel at something besides their main sport.

**Do you think it’s important to separate your value as a person from your performance as an athlete?**

I think athletes are always people first. I’m not sure you can separate them totally, but you need to realize you are not primarily an athlete, you’re a person. To be a human being, you need relationships and a sense of purpose. Remember that, for most people, sailing is a recreational sport. It’s a way to go out and have fun and let the stresses of the day mellow out a little bit.

**What is the best way to view your sailing competitors while racing? Are they your enemy or friend?**

That’s a good question. I think people have to do what works best for them. One thing for sure is that you don’t want to over-focus on your competitors because you have very little control over what they do. Try to concentrate on the areas where you have control, which include your boat and yourself.

Secondly, the enemy analogy doesn’t work for me because sailing is not war. You’re simply trying to master a skill and get to the finish line as quickly as possible. I prefer a concept that I call “cooperative competitiveness.”

This doesn’t mean you have to see everyone as friends because you may not be friends. But it realizes that we all learn from each other. Everyone gets better, and still the

best end up winning. Sailing has an aura of secretiveness, but this makes people tense and distrustful, plus it discourages learning and fun.

**Is it more dangerous to be overconfident or underconfident?**

It depends on your personality. Some people work better when they're a little overconfident, while others work better when they're slightly underconfident. But if you're very far in either direction, you're going to have problems. The goal is to have confidence in yourself and to be consistent. In sailing, consistency comes from setting goals, knowing your arousal level, knowing how to come back from perceived failure and controlling the things you can control.

**When you're sailing a bigger boat, what are some of the key things you should do to make sure your whole crew gets along well and functions effectively as a team?**

Many of the same principles apply, but you also have to do team building. First, you must identify roles for each person. Try to put people in positions where they can use their strengths to advantage.

Second, get people to respect each other's differences. And third, get people to communicate their differences. The ability to resolve conflict is absolutely essential for the health of any team, whether it's a married couple or an America's Cup crew. Our society brings us up with the belief that we shouldn't have conflict. But squelching conflict is the worst thing you can do. Learn to accept it and resolve it.

**If you get really mad in the middle of a race, what would you suggest?**

Try to calm yourself down, relax and get back involved in the good sensations of sailing, not the negative ones. If you're angry at yourself, focus on the task at hand. Work on the next task that will get you to the point you need to be at.

Also, it's OK to forgive yourself. A lot of times when we're real competitive we don't do that. But you have to realize that mistakes are inevitable. Imperfection does not mean failure. The best athletes in the world make errors. If you focus on those, you're not going to perform well. You have to pay attention to the times you do well. •

Dr. Jerry May is a clinical psychologist who has been working with international athletes since 1977. For 12 years he was the sports psychologist for the US Alpine Ski Team, and he was the US Olympic Team psychologist at the 1992 Games in Barcelona. He has worked with the US Sailing Team, and is also a professor at the University of Nevada Medical School in Reno.