



Ultra Mind – Mind Management for Ultras

By Stephane Moulin and Up Coaching Staff

The sun is high, you reach a lookout, the sky is blue, the breeze is cooling you off, the views are outstanding, birds are chirping, you're feeling great.

WAKE UP! This is what we all think about when entering an ultra event, but this pretty postcard perfect picture is far from reality – well, most of the time...

One enters an ultra because of the challenge, the environment, the people and camaraderie but also the suffering and the to push oneself to their own limit and redefining that limit. Suffering goes hand in hand in any ultra, both physical and mental.

And as much as you can the physical, you can train (or prepare) your mind to overcome some of the situations and doubts you may experience during an ultra.

Some refer to doing an ultra as a roller-coaster – It is most likely that throughout the course of an ultra you will experience some fantastic highs but also extreme lows – both physically and mentally. Quite often those go hand in hand, but sometimes trigger each other with the mind dictating the physical outcome. This could result in long “unnecessary pauses”, stops, abandon, feelings of giving up, DNFs.

Only rarely (but it does happen) does an ultra go smoothly, that perfect wave – The Holy Grail does exist... but is hard to come by.

Before continuing reading, please remember that there is a difference between a mental pain and an actual pain ie injury. You need to be attuned to your body which comes through experience and training. Doing an ultra is a journey not just an end goal and crossing that line. Finishing an event having done it with a broken leg is not smart, it is dangerous and does not benefit you (or the organisation).

But what if you can avoid or limit the impact of your mind on your performance?

A strong mind drives a strong body. And you can train yourself to overcome those blocks. More often than not, the negativity comes into play when you are tired/pushed to the edge when doubt and fear enters your thought process.

Fear of not being able to finish. Fear of failure. Fear of the unknown.

This is where training and planning comes into play:

- Be realistic – it may be common sense, but setting up a realistic goal will ensure you avoid some disappointment and stress during the event (if a time goal is unrealistic you will be stressing as you are “behind” etc). I always suggest having 3 plans – great, good and bad, and typically you will float in between the top 2 during an event. It is also handy for crews – if you have some – so that they have an idea of what to expect and adapt their timing as race develops.
- Be adaptive – things change during an ultra (weather, body, etc) so you need to remind yourself that it is ok to slow down now and then and adapting to the terrain/conditions.
- Be attuned to your body – deal with niggles there and then even if it means a 5 mins “unplanned” stop. A small hot spot at 10km may result in a course DNF 3 layer deep infected blister.....
- Push in training not on race day – for my athletes, I ‘want’ them to push / have a tough long run during training. This will have positive impacts at a later stage as you are teaching your body (and mind) that it is ok and that things will get better – eventually. Knowing that this feeling is temporary and knowing what it feels like will allow you to work your way out of that hole/ feeling of helplessness. Knowing it is temporary gives you hope and empowers you to move forward.
- Be focussed - Focus on the moment, not the finish line – you might be experiencing issues ½ way through an event. Focus your energy and mind on the moment and re-adjust goals: “ I’ll walk to that tree, that rock. I’ll get a clean shirt at the next CP”. Try to find something to look forward to – there is always something, as little as it may be. This will distract you from the current issue and will refocus your energy and thoughts.
- Control your mind – for some very long ultras, the mind will try to trick you to stop/give up / rest. This is typically experienced via hallucinations – they are different for everyone but all have the same purpose: to try and make you stop. Sometimes this is triggered by pure fatigue – so some caffeine intake may help. Sugar intake will also help as it allows your brain work optimally and your thinking will be much more rational, measured and less reactive.
- Be prepared – thinking processes get altered with fatigue/exhaustion and some simple tasks/decisions become very hard to make. Or sometimes you cannot make that decision: gel or bar etc. Have your race and nutrition plan written out before the race so you / the crew, just have to follow it on the day
- Trust yourself/ your crew – you’ve trained hard and long, leverage that fact and remind yourself that you CAN do this, you are worthy. If you have a crew, trust them, they will do what they believe is best for you even if at the time, you think otherwise
- Micro-sleep – if you are too exhausted and struggle to stay awake, opt for a short 10/15 mins micro sleep. This will allow you to “reset” your mind without going into deep sleep phase. You will wake up feeling fresh and re-energised.

Lastly, just a word of warning when things are going great and feeling terrific. Just as you can become despondent and negative during the bad patches, conversely control your euphoria and enthusiasm when things are on the upward wave. It's easy to get carried away in the moment and push outside your comfort zone as a response. It's easy to think you don't need to fuel and drink when you're in this spot. So be wary of the high. Try to keep restrained and measured and when things are feeling great, don't get carried away. Instead stretch out this phase as long and as best as you can.

Keep composed, stay curious and make your day sustainable. Don't catastrophise the lows and not take the highs for granted.

Most importantly, enjoy... Enjoy the moment, the day, the experience and remind yourself why you are here. This will fuel your positivity which will also push away those dark thoughts.

At the end of the day, it is supposed to be fun!

Happy training 😊