



Sports PSYCHOLOGY

Andrew Hermann won at the Olympic Games in Sydney in 2000. He didn't earn a medal there. In fact, if you look up the results of the 50K race walk, you'll find that he finished 31st. But ask him or anyone involved in his training and they'll tell you he earned a victory. So how is it possible to win

when 30 people have beaten you?

It's easy if you create your own definition of winning. We call this "developing a Winning Mind."

Formula for a Winning Mind:

USING EFFORT TO PRODUCE FOCUS,
CONFIDENCE & COMMITMENT

by Geoff Miller, M.A.

The formula for developing a Winning Mind is to define your game so you can maximize Focus, Confidence, and Commitment. It's based on producing your best effort, not on an outcome. This is what Andrew tapped into in Sydney and during the two years of training and trials that led up to the Games. You can use this same formula to achieve success in your own personal and professional "races".

The concept of redefining winning is a delicate one in sport. Bring it up around competitive, driven people and you are bound to draw fire. It's true that our world is based on gold medals and championship rings. We want those same things in our pursuits of excellence. The formula for developing a Winning Mind is not about accepting mediocrity or becoming complacent with losing. It isn't a way to justify coming in second, but rather a way of living with yourself, win or lose, when you walk away from your contests at the end of the day.

Developing a Winning Mind is every bit as much about winning as the philosophy attributed to Vince Lombardi that "winning isn't every-

thing, it's the only thing". The difference is in the way you approach your battles. The Winning Mind-set is designed to relieve pressure and change attitudes about expectations. The opponents we create in our heads are often more formidable than our actual competitors.

The bottom line is this: you have a better chance of winning if you simply focus on giving your best effort rather than setting out to take first place. As you get comfortable with this concept, your results will match your efforts. Your formula for developing a Winning Mind begins with defining your game.

Defining Your Game

Defining your game is a modified goal-setting process that helps you determine a plan of attack so you can achieve your most important outcomes. It provides an overview of your training that includes physical, mental, and sport-specific tasks that you need to practice regularly to improve strength, perfect skills, and prepare yourself for competition.

Begin the process by asking yourself what you really want. This can

be as "dreamy" a goal as you like. It's true that goal-setting literature advises making your goals realistic, but you should do this by thinking big and then analyzing what's really possible in the short term. Don't limit yourself by setting the bar too low because you want to make sure you can achieve your goals. You may not be able to win the Boston Marathon now, or EVER for that matter, but if you don't start with that kind of dream, you'll never know what could have been.

Okay, so winning the Boston Marathon is now our ultimate goal. The next step is to think about the physical tasks you need to accomplish. Can you run a mile in less than five minutes? Can you run 26 of them? If not, then you need to set a new goal for the present time, but you can still keep this as your ultimate goal.

After a review of your current shape and run times, you decide that breaking the 3 hour mark is going to be your goal for the marathon. Your "gold medal" has now become 2:59:59. But the key to running under three hours will not be to focus on your time, but on doing your best to prepare for race day and giving everything you have when the gun goes off. In order to do this, you must outline all the physical, mental, and sport-specific tasks you need to mas-

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ter to run a sub-three hour marathon. Turn this into a weekly checklist with your goal as the heading (see Table 1 on page 11).

Defining Your Game

Outcome: Run the Boston Marathon in under 3 hours

(#) = number assigned per week

| | Sun | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat | Total |
|--------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Physical Training | | | | | | | | |
| Lifting Weights (3) | X | | X | | X | | | 3 |
| Stretching (6) | X | X | X | X | X | X | | 6 |
| Sprints (2) | | X | | | | X | | 2 |
| 800m Sets (2) | | X | | | | X | | 2 |
| REST (2) | | | | X | | | X | 2 |
| Injury Prevention (4) | | X | | X | X | | X | 4 |
| Mental Training | | | | | | | | |
| Relaxation (4) | X | X | | X | X | | | 4 |
| Centering (6) | X | X | X | X | X | | X | 6 |
| Visualization (2) | | | X | | X | | | 2 |
| Focus Training (2) | X | | | X | | | | 2 |
| Marathon Tasks | | | | | | | | |
| 5-mile Training Run (3) | | | X | | X | X | | 3 |
| 10+ mile Run (1) | X | | | | | | | 1 |

If you're working with a personal trainer or a running coach, have them help you put together a physical training program. This might include things like sprint training, track work, weight room sessions, stretching exercises, and cross-training. Rest and treatment of injuries should be included on your physical task list. Mental training might include relaxation exercises, centering, visualization, learning to switch your attention from broad to narrow channels and vice versa. Sport-specific work would be putting everything together with distance runs of varying lengths.

Once you've created a list of everything you need to work on, your task is to figure out how often you must practice each item on your list in order to make measurable improvements in your strength and speed. How many short runs do you need to get in each week to maintain your pace? How many long runs are required to increase your endurance? How often do you need to practice

your centering in order to help you stay focused at the end of your runs? By counting the number of times you work on each of these skills, you are measuring the process of achieving your goal. Assign a number of days per week you will work on each task and hold yourself to this standard. Place an X in each box when you've completed that task for the day.

Defining your game and measuring your progress is not complicated. Putting together your checklist is a simple process that requires only a little assistance from a physical skills coach and a mental skills coach. You can increase the intensity of your own program by completing items on your list more frequently each week or by making your tasks more strenuous. For example, if you reach a point in which three training runs of five miles per week are not tiring you out, you can move up to four runs a week or you can increase your three weekly runs to seven miles each.

The trick to easing the pressure on yourself is to take your focus away from your goal of running a three-hour marathon and direct it at achieving a 100% completion rate on your checklist. Great athletes in every sport attribute most of their successes to preparation and lots of hard work. For every game-winning jumper that Michael Jordan makes, there were thousands taken on the practice floor along with countless drops of sweat from conditioning. Andrew Hermann trained one kilometer at a time, one day at a time, so he wouldn't have to wonder if he was ready to compete when it came time to walk the 50 biggest kilometers of his life.

What Can You Control?

Controlling your destiny is empowering. But the unsettling reality that accompanies every competition is that we can't control all the variables that affect our success. A great quarterback can't control how much time his offensive line gives him to throw

the ball or whether his receivers are able to break free from their defenders. A figure skater has no control over how the judging panel scores her performance. Runners have no control over the conditions in which they run. When “winning” is your main concern, these variables can pose great distractions. They don’t seem so daunting when you focus on doing your best regardless of what you are up against.

There are three key elements to performing under pressure. If you can remain focused, keep your confidence high, and stay committed to your plan, you’ll be successful.

Every athlete can control the amount of effort he or she expends while training and competing. “When I took my focus away from the other walkers on the course and put it on my own race, I felt much more confident,” says Hermann. “I knew that if I went out and tried my best, nothing would stand in my way — not cold weather, not the pain, and not my current pace. My only goal when racing was to get to the next kilometer as fast as I could, and when I got there, just to get to the next one in the same way.”

Focus, Confidence, Commitment

There are three key elements to performing under pressure. If you can remain focused, keep your confidence high, and stay committed to your plan, you’ll be successful. The elements work together; confidence frees you to focus, commitment breeds confidence, and focus gives positive feedback that builds more confidence and validates your commitment. To build mental toughness, you must

strengthen each of these. Your formula for developing a Winning Mind provides you with the foundation for this strengthening to take place.

With lots of physical, mental, and sport-specific tasks to work on each week, you have plenty to keep you focused without having to think about the act of winning itself. When you get to your competition, you can use your training experiences to help you achieve a narrow-external focus, which you’ll need to execute, and to switch to broad and internal channels when necessary to maintain your intensity so you don’t come out flat or tire too soon.

Confidence is crucial to your mind set. Working hard does more than just strengthen your muscles — it bolsters your confidence. When you feel confident, your adaptability increases, you can switch to any attentional channel, and you can let your movement flow. Most people get butterflies prior to big competitions. There’s no better way to get rid of pre-game jitters than to think about all the preparation you have made to perform when it counts. The only people who have anything to fear on race day are the ones who can’t look themselves in the mirror and say that they have done all that they can to be ready to run. You build

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confidence every time you place an X in a box on your Checklist.

You need commitment before you can build confidence. Anyone can stay committed to a plan when they already know that it works. Commitment comes into play when you believe in something, but don’t yet

know how to get there. Defining your game begins with this type of commitment. It gets stronger every time you get up at 5AM to get in a run before work or take ten minutes out of your day to practice your centering.

New Perspective on Winning

Winning isn’t really about an outcome. It’s about a process. If winning really were the only thing, what would be the harm in cheating? When you think about it, doesn’t the feeling you get when you win come just as much from knowing how hard you worked for it, as it does from knowing how much you wanted it? Defining your game maximizes your focus, confidence, and commitment. It gives you a way to measure effort, not outcome, so you can savor your victories even more when you earn them.

When Andrew talks about his Olympic experiences, he sometimes quotes from a movie that didn’t challenge for any awards and certainly wouldn’t be the first one you would think of when searching for memorable sports quotes. In “Cool Runnings,” John Candy plays a former US bobsledder who had a gold medal stripped from him for illegally weighting down his sled. When asked about it years later he says, “A gold medal is a wonderful thing. But if you aren’t enough without it, you’ll never be enough with it.”

Andrew Hermann did his best in Sydney and he knows that it was enough. ■

Geoff Miller, M.A., is a partner at Winning Mind LLC, a San Diego-based high-performance consulting group dedicated to helping people improve their ability to perform under pressure and achieve meaningful goals. Winning Mind works with elite performers in Fortune 500 companies, professional and amateur sports, and Special Forces military units.

For more information on developing a Winning Mind and defining your game, visit www.thewinningmind.com or email Geoff at miller@thewinningmind.com.