

# Four ways to get your race head on...

**PSYCHOLOGY IS THE** final frontier when it comes to sporting performance, so how do the pros get in the right head space?

It is common for athletes to get a training programme, follow it to the last ink dot and feel fit and confident leading up to the race. Images are conjured up in the mind of overtaking people, doing well and even winning. On the start line, however, these images don't translate. All of a sudden, all the months of carefully planned training goes out the window and the anticipated results don't materialise.

Being fit enough to win a race is only part of the battle on the road to race success. Your mental strength, confidence and race attitude plays a huge part in transforming fitness into results. *CW* staff writer Penny Comins is a veteran of many Ironman races, and she is an experienced sportive rider and marathon runner but, despite dedicated training, results eluded her. However, this year things turned out differently: with a bit of guidance from mental performance consultant Andy Barton, she finally got her race head on.

"In training, everything goes well, I do each session, hit the numbers and relish in the competition for the town sign sprint on weekend rides. Yet when it comes to racing, I let people past and don't have the race head that everyone talks of.

"With four months of solid training behind me, I had ticked all the boxes in my entire programme for Ironman Regensburg. I had stuck to my nutritional plan and hit race weight.

"Now I wanted to do really well. I wanted to go to the Ironman World Champs in Kona.

"But I knew there was one thing missing from my approach — I needed to learn how to get the elusive 'race head' on.

"Mental training is key to top performance and has been used widely in the sporting arena for many years. Andy Barton, mental performance consultant from coaching company The Sporting Mind, listened to my dilemma and then prescribed four tasks to go away and practise in my last few weeks' build-up to the race."



Penny hits the road in search of her goal...

**STEPS TO SUCCESS**

## Four key ways to develop your race head

### 1 POSITIVE-BASED GOAL

**Problem** — My goal of qualifying for the World Champs was to stop people asking me if I had been before, after all the races I had done. It was a negative, shame-based goal.

**Solution** — Develop a positive-based goal that I work towards.

**Example** — Barton shot a direct bullet and asked what I had to do to 'do well'.

I simply said 'ride harder'. A moment's silence. I realised that I had never thought about what I actually had to do in the cycling section of the race. I had thought if I had done the training it would just unfold on the day and I would do well. I didn't even know what my 'do well' was in real measurable terms.

Barton took it back a step and asked what my goal was.

For me, it is to qualify for the Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii. Even though I am surrounded by cyclists, surprisingly the bike leg is the part I struggle with and need the help with. My goal is to qualify for Kona, and to do so I need to drastically get my bike time down.

Barton kept the tricky questions coming: "Why do you want to qualify?"

Again my answer made me red in the face: "So I wasn't ashamed of my efforts. Going to the World Championships would make me feel like my efforts were justified," I said. This, I learnt, was a negative-based goal.

I needed to turn that around and make it something positive to work towards. "Something that makes you get excited; a pleasure-orientated goal," encouraged Barton.

It took a few moments of silent thinking to come up with positive-based goals. My favourite is to feel the crowds as I run down the finish chute at the flagship event of my sport.

**2 CHUNKING IT DOWN**  
**Problem** — I only had an end goal time and no journey details on how to get there.

**Solution** — Break down the time goal into tiny chunks that would be easy to monitor throughout the event.

**Example** — Once I had a goal that was positively reinforced, a work-towards goal, I actually got excited about it. Barton suggested the next step was to chunk down the goal into manageable bits. Break down the 180 kilometres into 36 five-kilometre sections.

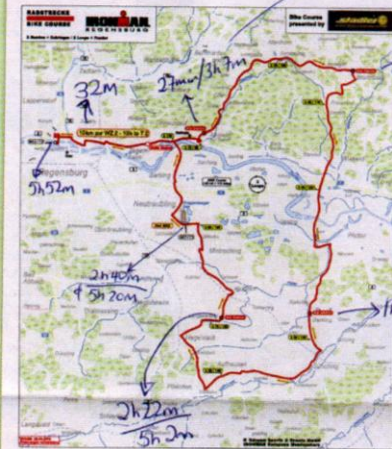
Barton used the fine example of American swimmer John Naber. He wanted to win gold in the Olympics after seeing Mark Spitz win seven golds in the pool in 1972. He knew his time was 3.2 seconds shy of the winning time currently, and extrapolated out over the following four years, taking into consideration the improvements swimmers were making, he needed to improve his time by four seconds.

Initially this seemed like a daunting prospect but once Naber broke it down into

monthly, weekly and finally daily goals, all he had to improve each day was 1/300th of a second. Swimming twice a day he had to improve 1/1,200th of a second each session. To put that into perspective, when the eyelid blinks five 1/1,200ths of a second elapse. Now that the goal seemed more achievable in each session, it was easier for Naber to focus on the next step, that 1/1,200th. He knew what the end goal was, but didn't think about it and focused on the now.

Breaking the race into chunks meant I wasn't riding aimlessly. I went away, examined the profile and tirelessly worked out what speeds I needed and realistically could do on each section, tweaked them a bit and finally arrived at the magic number. These kept me focused and in the now. A really important place to be, according to Barton: "Think about your process and performance, not the outcome. Be in the present and stay there. If you fall behind your mini-goal time you will be able to push a little harder on the next segment and bring it back into line. It won't be too late."

## Radstrecke Bike Course



- full road closure.
- could be windy in south.
- 1350m total.
- perelty box's near aid stations

**ARM YOURSELF WITH MENTAL STRENGTH**

## Cycle-logical warfare

If you need to take your training and racing to the next level, then forget trying to squeeze in another ride or turbo session. Work on your mind — the thing that drives your legs and body forward, keeps you going while you suffer and gives you the drive and determination to get to the finish.

Head to The Sporting Mind, consult a mental performance coach and get the edge through developing your mind and a race head.

Andy Barton, The Sporting Mind, 34-36a Warwick Way, London, SW1V 1RY, 0845 652 2651, [www.thesportingmind.com](http://www.thesportingmind.com)

### 3 POSITIVE-BASED STATEMENTS

**Problem** — A natural habit of putting down any compliment and twisting a statement to have a negative connotation.

**Solution** — Create positives after every negative statement with a but....

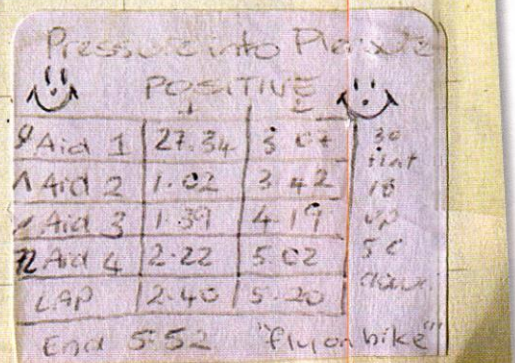
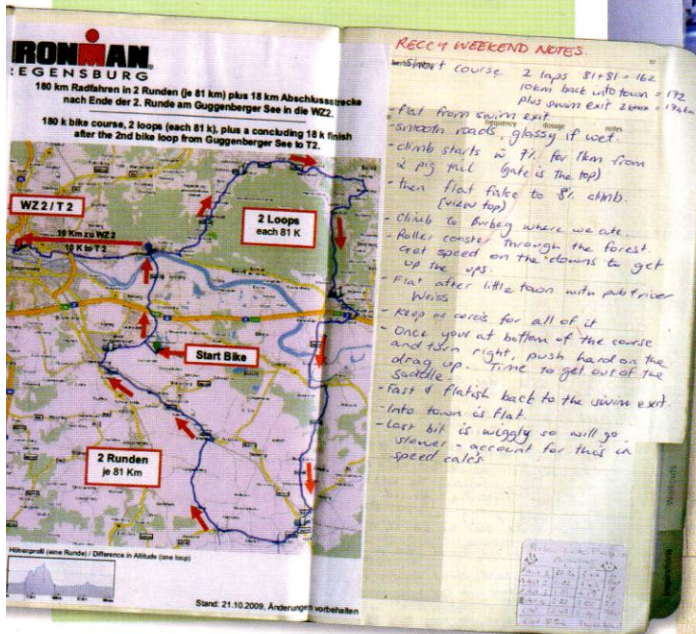
**Example** — It became evident to Barton that I was in the habit of putting myself down and looking at my riding in a negative light. Instead of trying to change my thinking to all positive statements, I was to work with what I had. He suggested following every statement I made with a BUT and then a positive statement. An example I had to come up with on the spot was 'I haven't got under six hours on the bike BUT I am training at a pace that will allow me to do it next time.' Based on sports psychology research, Barton stated that I would see improvement in four days; my brain would be rewired to think positively. I would use positive language. And what the mind thinks, the body will do.

### 4 RECLAIM THE PASSION

**Problem** — Cycling was a drag and my least favourite of the three disciplines. I had lost the love for the bike.

**Solution** — Take myself back through my memories to a place where I enjoyed cycling and rewire my thoughts to have that passion again.

**Example** — When it came to the cycle part of an Ironman, I was filled with dread. It was the longest leg and often the loneliest. My butt would hurt, my lower back would ache and my neck would be on fire being in the TT position for so long. Barton asked me to remember a time when I loved cycling. I just couldn't think of one. He asked when I first learnt to ride, taking it back to the beginning. Instantly, I grinned recalling the time Mum took off my trainer wheels and I proclaimed the bike to be broken as it didn't go forward anymore. Clapping his hands, Barton said I needed to recall that moment, where I was determined to make the bike work. I was to use that example of when I had the passion to ride. Every time it got tough I had to draw on that moment of love for cycling and use it to keep hitting my chunked-down goals.



### Did it work?

I tried the techniques out on the Etape du Tour. I changed my goal from 'not being scooped up in the sag wagon and buses' to 'finishing within two hours of the cut-off'. I made mini time goals for the top of each col and used positive-based statements to bolster my performance the whole way. People were dropping me BUT I was on target.

Two weeks later, the big day loomed; Ironman Regensburg, Germany. I had a positive goal for why I wanted to do well, I knew what doing well meant in terms of times and mini goals. I had my race head on and ended up slashing 25 minutes off my bike time, getting well under the elusive six-hour mark. I didn't get a Kona slot, but I had the race of a lifetime. Training my mind was the next step in my training to get more from the hours I had already spent in the saddle. Using these simple steps and exercises could help you take that step towards realising your pre-race visualisation or finishing another race just for fun.

"I had my race head on and slashed 25 minutes off my bike time, going well under six hours"

### SUMMONING A ONE-TRACK MIND

## How Sir Chris does it

AS Richard Moore says in the fascinating book *Heroes, Villains & Velodromes*, describing Sir Chris Hoy's mental routines in minutes before the kilo at the Athens Olympics: "He remembers the drills and mental rehearsals he has gone through with Steve Peters (GB team psychiatrist): negative thoughts are natural, don't panic when you have one, displace it with positive thoughts. And always, always turn your focus to the start, and the routine. Bang!"



Hoy: trained to think positive

### PUTTING IT INTO PRACTISE

## How sports psychology has helped the pros

### Lizzie Armitstead

MENTAL preparation is an important factor for Great Britain's Lizzie Armitstead, silver medalist in the road race at the recent Commonwealth Games.

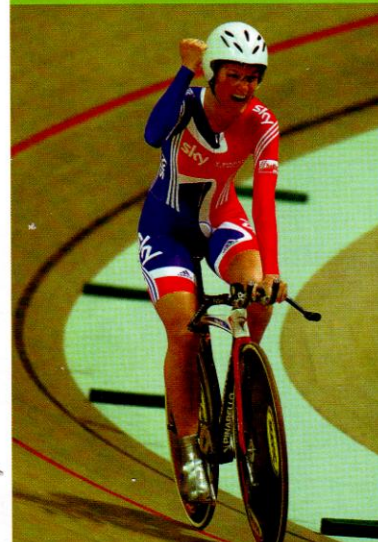
"The mental side of things is pretty big for me. I've had general group sessions with Steve Peters (GB psychiatrist) and the biggest thing I've learnt from him is that if you've given 100 per cent in training then you've prepared yourself the best you can. That approach takes away some of the pressure."

As a strong all-round rider, Armitstead is likely to ride the omnium at the London Olympics. The omnium sees riders compete over five different events, putting both physical and mental strain on them.

Armitstead continued: "On the track is where I get most nervous. Last year, I went into the omnium just hoping for the best and I wasn't prepared for each event."

"Referring to logic and trying to take the emotion out of things are very useful techniques, and I think I'll be better equipped this season."

"At big events like the World Champs, sometimes you just want to run away, but then you remember just how much hard work you've put into it and focus on what you have to do. It's also worth remembering that in the end it's just a bike race."



Armitstead: preparing for 2012 Olympic success