

Coaching Core Mental Skills with Teen Cyclists

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Why work with teen cyclists on the mental side of their sport? Coaching teens on the physical aspects of training and competition is challenging enough, what with teens' busy schedules, rampaging hormones, and occasional – shall we say – *attitude*. Yet at all levels of sport, it is so often mental fitness that sets athletes apart. And more importantly, the five core mental skills young men and women can learn in cycling – Goal-Setting, Communication, Concentration, Positive Self-Talk, and Managing Emotions – are skills they can use throughout their lives. As coaches of teen athletes, we have the opportunity to help equip them for success not only in cycling, but in their journey through adolescence to adulthood and beyond.

Before we dive into a quick tour of the five core skills, let's look at the factors that influence how we work on the skills with high school athletes.

Teens, Development, and Sports

The central developmental task for adolescents is creating identity. That can be hard for us adults to understand, depending on how far removed we are from our own adolescence (and perhaps, how traumatic it was!). It certainly can be hard for teens to feel that we “get it.” And yet the more you “get it” about them – whatever the *it* is at any point in time – the more likely you'll be able to create and sustain a relationship of mutual trust, and the more likely the athlete will be receptive to what you have to offer.

Rather than being defined by what's been done to them and for them, teens are moving to define themselves by what they do. On the one hand, that can create a challenge for us as coaches: as they construct their identity, teens literally aren't consistent in who they are from year to year, and sometimes even from day to day. That can make it difficult for us to figure out how to work with them effectively. On the other hand, adolescence is a time when boys and girls can learn to take charge of their own development. If they're motivated enough – for example, by wanting to have fun, improve, and succeed in cycling – they can be eager learners.

However, when teens take on an issue, they often begin wrestling with it from a position of idealism: how things *ought* to be. Teens have usually not yet had the life experience to see things as they actually are (or to have their idealistic spirit crushed, depending on your viewpoint). It's important to have empathy for their position and not get impatient when teaching, working and negotiating with them.

It's also very important to know *why* your teen athletes are cycling. Ask them! If you know what's driving them, you'll be better able to connect core mental skills with what your athletes care about the most. In general, research shows that the top five reasons boys participate in sports are: (1) to have fun, (2) to improve skills, (3) for the excitement of competition, (4) to do something they're good at, and (5) to stay in shape. Winning is reason #8. For girls, it's (1) to have fun, (2) to stay in shape, (3) to get exercise, (4) to improve skills, and (5) to do something they're good at. Winning isn't in the top 10. Note that all of these are *intrinsic* motivators – they create motivation for the athlete from within; they're about how the athlete thinks and feels about him/herself, precisely at the time when that's the main thing they're doing in general. That's not to suggest that winning isn't important; it is. But it does suggest that in order to be most effective with teen athletes, it's important to see the complete picture; to see each factor that's important to them.

Speaking of which, here's a quick reminder of other factors that can affect your athletes' cycling:

- Home life. The parents' view of the teen's participation in cycling, the parents' degree of engagement with their teen (eg. overinvolved/pressuring, balanced, critical, or disengaged), peace or conflict within the family, and the parents' relationship with you.
- Academics and Social Life. It's not just how things *appear* to be going for teens in these areas; it's how teens *feel* things are going.
- Physical health and stage of physical development. Cycling as a contributor to the teen's growing self-esteem can be a good thing, but it can also produce an urgency that can lead to injury, overtraining, and burnout.
- Usual and unusual mental/emotional distress. Stress. Friends' stress. Loss, including divorce. Depression.

Anything you learn from your athletes about these things can be helpful in “tuning” how you coach their mental skills. Your school's counselor/psychologist can be an invaluable collaborator in assessing what's “up” with your athletes.

The 5 Core Skills

Research shows that if you believe in yourself – if you have high *self-efficacy* – you're more likely to engage in a task, persist, and be successful. Not rocket science, I

know. But what affects the teen athlete's belief in herself, and how can you make a positive contribution to that? One of the most powerful tools you have is **helping your athletes effectively set, manage themselves to, and reset their goals**. If a teen has the wrong goals – or the wrong kinds of goals – she can be set up for frustration, demotivation, undue stress, overtraining, and even burnout. Effective goal-setting and goal-management, in contrast, can lead to increased experiences of success, fun, and perhaps most importantly, *perceived competence*. How teens evaluate their attempts at mastery can have a huge effect on self-esteem and motivation.

With your help, have your athletes set SMART objectives: **S**pecific (“climb Mt. Tam in under an hour by the end of the season”), **M**easurable (ask how they'll know they've achieved a goal, and make sure the answer's in the goal), **A**chievable (too easy = demotivating; too hard = dangerous), **R**elevant (eg., a time-trialling goal may be irrelevant for a MTBer), and **T**imebound (by when will they achieve the goal?). Help them develop goal-setting and goal-management into a habit, not just something that's done at the beginning of the season. Help them define not only *outcome goals* (“Finish in the Top 10 in 3 races”) but *process goals* as well (“Maintain good form whenever dropped on climbs”). And counsel them against *goal-creep*: if they've set a goal (“finish in the top 20”), and they achieve it, take care that they don't reset it after the finish (“I could have finished so much higher; I blew it!”).

Communication is a skill that can have a significant impact on your athletes' performance and experience in cycling. They may need to ask for your help, negotiate with a teacher to makeup a missed test, work with teammates during a race, reassure parents about time spent on the bike (and away from homework) or disagree with your recommendations. Good communication begins with good listening and empathy. So, when they're talking to you, model that. Listen carefully and show them that you “get it.” (and if you don't, stand corrected humbly). Encourage them to be assertive – to speak up, respectfully, about what they feel is true. Teens are often hesitant to speak up when they're concerned that their relationship(s) could be harmed, or that they'll just plain feel bad. Show them that they can speak up to you and that you will respond to them truthfully and respectfully as well. Encourage them to speak to their teammates – about things that are going well, as well as things they're concerned about – in team meetings, on training rides, and in races. And finally, help them manage conflict by encouraging them to manage their stress and reactivity whenever they're in one. Being emotional is fine, to a point. But the most common conflict-management problem I see is *rushing*: rushing to avoid, rushing to interrupt, rushing to resolve the conflict, rushing right past understanding each other. Why? Because we often get stressed when we're in conflict; ineffectively managed stress fuels a feeling of urgency, and urgency fuels rushing.

Concentration is not the easiest skill to teach a teen who frequently may have a limited attention span. However, it's certainly a skill that plays a big role in cycling. The closer a cyclist is to “being in the zone,” the more of themselves they're able to bring to each moment, the more likely they'll respond well to (or initiate) an opportunity, and the more likely they'll be able to avoid crashes. Yet losing focus is going to happen, so the skill is in not only maintaining concentration and shifting it (eg. from tempo to an attack)

but also in regaining it quickly. Help your athletes understand when they're focused: What does effective focus feel and sound like? What's their *focus style*: when they're focused, are they focused more inside themselves or outside themselves, and is their focus narrow (eg. focused on breathing, or on the cyclocomputer) or broad? Consider giving them "concentration intervals" in training, where they practice maintaining race-level focus. Have them tell you about the experience or make a few notes in their training log about it. Help them identify their top *recurring distractors* -- such as pain, fatigue, riders who are too close, or that boy/girl they have a crush on – and help them develop a refocusing plan for each one. And consider having your athletes develop a pre-race focusing routine that gets them to the start line already "in the zone."

There's a conversation going on in teens' heads, and it's not a sign of mental illness. It's **self-talk**, and we all do it. Think back to people who have coached, taught, mentored, and guided you. How did they talk to you? Who do *you* sound like when you talk to yourself about your performance? Who do you sound like when you talk with your athletes? How you talk to them may have a significant impact on how they talk to themselves about their cycling performance. Help your athletes learn to manage themselves to their goals skillfully. In particular, watch for signs of negative self-talk: "I'm such a lousy climber," "I'm not going to finish in the front group, so it's not worth finishing at all," "Yeah, I did OK in the race; I was just lucky." Help them have an accurate, rather than distorted, view of how they perform. Coach them to stop negative self-talk, to question it if that helps ("What's the proof that you're a 'lousy climber'?"), to replace it with (believable) positive self-talk ("I'm climbing well today, for me."), and to practice calming themselves when they notice it. Why this last technique? Because stress, anxiety, fear, tension, worry, pressure – I call it the Stress Family Robinson – it's the major fuel for negative self-talk, which itself fuels more stress. Not the kind of cycling we want for teens.

Which brings us to the final core mental skill: **managing emotions**, particularly the stress family. Anxiety and its siblings contribute not only to negative self-talk, but to unpleasant sensations and images, distraction, errors, avoidance, and energy loss. Help teens manage stress on the bike through breathing techniques, visualization, positive self-talk, smiling, talking to teammates – whatever calms them. Talk with them about how they're managing stress *off* the bike, and give them ideas if they want them. And that pre-race focusing routine mentioned above? Help them start races off on the right...er, pedal: motivated, calm, and focused.

While the stress family is by far the main set of emotions that will tend to affect your athletes cycling performance, there are other emotions that come up at times as well. Sadness is certainly a normal part of life, but be on the lookout for sadness that's prolonged or seemingly serious; it could be one of the many signs of depression. Get consultation from your school counselor/psychologist if need be. Anger is another emotion that's to be expected, to a point. If the athlete is having trouble containing anger – for example, directing it inappropriately toward you, teammates, competitors, or himself – see if you can work with him to channel the anger into energy that can be managed and used effectively on the bike. Again, get consultation if need be.

That concludes our whirlwind tour through the five core skills of mentally fit cyclists. As you work with your teens to develop these skills, keep in mind the opportunity you have to make a difference not only in their cycling, but in how they manage, relate to, and feel about themselves. And feel free to get in touch with me if you have questions. I wish you a terrific season!

Resources

For more details and coaching suggestions on mental fitness in cycling, including articles on advanced mental skills (eg., increasing tolerance for suffering, recovering from injury, sustaining motivation) please go to www.wholeathlete.com, click on Sport Psychology, and then click on the Articles link.

For more general information and suggestions on working with teens, I highly recommend these books:

- [The Double-Goal Coach](#), by Jim Thompson. Jim founded the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), a national nonprofit organization based at Stanford University. This book is filled with useful suggestions, and you may find it worthwhile to be certified by the PCA (www.positivecoach.org). There is a new, inexpensive, abridged version of the book available on their website.
- [Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls](#), by Mary Pipher. The classic. Pipher is particularly eloquent in her suggestions for ways we can help girls build and maintain a strong sense of self.
- [Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys](#), by Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson. Particularly poignant in discussing the “culture of cruelty” among some boys, and ways in which we can help boys become more emotionally intelligent.

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