

The Triathlon Summit - Mentally Prepare for the Big Race with Patrick Cohn

KERRY: I'm calling in from sunny St. Petersburg, Florida. Where else do we have some people from tonight?

FEMALE 1: New Jersey

KERRY: All right. Good deal.

MALE 1: Plantation, Florida.

KERRY: All right. All right. Near me. Pretty good.

FEMALE 2: Chicago.

DR. COHN: Hey Kerry, it's Dr. Cohn. Can you hear me?

KERRY: Hey, Dr. Cohn. How are you doing? I'm doing well. Yes, I'm here.

DR. COHN: Good.

KERRY: Good. Well, with that we're going to wait another minute or two before we formally start. Like I said, everyone's in the right place here. I'm Kerry Sullivan. I am the Triathlon Summit founder. Patrick Cohn is now on the line with us as well, who is a renowned sports psychologist. We're going to be talking about all kinds of great stuff tonight that you guys can implement and hopefully use in your racing. So, it's good. How are you doing tonight Patrick?

DR. COHN: Good, good. How's it going?

KERRY: I'm doing great man, doing great.

DR. COHN: Which week are we in here? Is this the second week or third week?

KERRY: This is actually the first right now.

DR. COHN: OK, we're in the first week.

KERRY: Yeah. Last week we were going to have Heather Gollnick on but something came up at the last minute so she'll be going later on in the series. So it should be good.

DR. COHN: I'm kicking it off for you tonight then?

KERRY: Absolutely, man. Definitely, definitely. It should be good. All right. With that what I'm going to do is I'm going to mute the line, mute all the guests

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out, and then you should all be able to hear me and Patrick.

DR. COHN: Now can they ask questions along the way?

KERRY: All right, good deal. It looks like it worked. Like I said before, my name is Kerry Sullivan and this is the Triathlon Summit. On the line tonight we have a great speaker. His name is Dr. Patrick Cohn. He is a renowned sports psychologist. He's worked with all kinds of different athletes from a wide range of sports. He has been featured in places like USA Today, ESPN, Sports Illustrated, Men's Health, Orlando Sentinel. He's also been on CNN, Fox, MSNBC, to name a few. He's the founder of Peak Performance Sports in Orlando, Florida. In general he is one of the leading authorities out there on sports psychology. So with that I'm going to welcome Dr. Patrick Cohn to the line. How are you doing today Patrick?

DR. COHN: Good, Kerry. How are you doing?

KERRY: I'm doing great. I'm doing great. So with that we're going to be talking about the mental aspects of triathlons and things like that. Let's just start with this question here: what are the mental pitfalls that prevent athletes from performing their best in races?

DR. COHN: Good question. Let me back up a little Kerry and talk a little about the importance of the mental game, what is the mental game, for some of the newbies out there that really don't know what the mental game is. It all has to do with your thoughts, your beliefs, your images, that you have when you go into a race. Obviously your body, you train and you train and you train your body for hours and hours and hours, but do you train your mind? And do you go into a race completely focused and competent, feeling ready? Those are some of the buzzwords that I talk about when we talk about the mental game. Obviously the head is screwed on the body, right? So what you put into your head, what you program into your head, is going to come out through your physical performance? So the mental game is huge, especially when it's time to go race and you've got other distractions going on around, other people, bystanders, you're worried about your equipment, your support crew and everything. So it's critical to have a good mental game.

I call it a mental game. I'm not really a psychologist per se, I'm a mental coach. My role is to help athletes perform up to what their potential or their physical capabilities are. The number one sign, if you're not performing as well as you do in big races as you do in local races or as you do in your training, then that's a sign that maybe the mind is getting the way. OK, so we got that one out of the way.

All right, Kerry, so the question you asked about what are the big mental

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game pitfalls that I see for athletes that maybe are about to enter that big race.

KERRY: Yeah.

DR. COHN: Well, I'm going to start basic. I start here with all of my students. The place that I start with is I talk about expectations. Here's my formula. I'm just going to throw out the formula and then I'll talk a little bit about the pitfalls. One of the formula's that I talk about is you have to have high confidence, void of expectation, and set manageable goals or objectives for yourself. That whole formula includes a lot.

Basically what I'm saying is I strip out expectation. I strip out demand that you place upon your performance and I talk about having pure confidence in your ability to have a good race. Now confidence is, "I trained hard. I deserve to perform well." Or, "I'm going to kick ass on the bike." Whatever it is. I hope I can use some other language in here, Kerry, if that's OK.

KERRY: That's fine. We're all good.

DR. COHN: The expectation part about that is the demands and the strict demands you place upon your performance. "I've got to have this specific time in my swim in order to be on target." Or, "I've got to have this type of transition in order to be on target." Sometimes you train so hard and you work so hard at it that it's difficult for athletes to let go of those expectations. So it's almost like the more success you've had and the harder you train, the more pressure and expectation you put on yourself.

So one of my strategies when I'm working with athletes is you have to back it down. I'm not saying to not go in with a plan and not go in with goals, into the race. What I'm saying is be careful of those really strict expectations that you put on your performance that will do this. They'll turn it around into pressure and it'll cause you to try too hard in the race, try to be too perfect in the race. OK, is that making sense, Kerry?

KERRY: Yeah, it makes perfect sense.

DR. COHN: How many of these did you want me to go over? Do you want me to give you the top two, the top three pitfalls?

KERRY: Yeah, why don't you give me the top three. Go from there and how you can get around them.

DR. COHN: Another one is the confidence issue, obviously. Confidence is so important. I call it a cure-all in sports. What I mean by that is if you're

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confident you're most likely relaxed. If you're confident you feel prepared. If you're confident you're going to get the most out of your ability and you're not going to get scared. What often happens, one of the pitfalls is that athletes that have a lot of confidence in their training, sometimes go into competition and races doubting themselves. They leave confidence to chance. I call it leaving confidence to chance. They're unsure about how they're going to perform, even though they may have months and months preparing for a race, or years and years of experience, a base for confidence, they'll go into a race not fully embracing that confidence because at the last minute they might have some doubts. They wait to see how it goes, see how it goes at the start of the swim or see how it goes at the start of the bike, to say, "OK, I've got it today" or "I don't have it." That's being reactive instead of proactive with your confidence.

So the solution there is to make sure when you go into a race that you're being proactive. And proactive means you're just thinking ahead, taking responsibility for your confidence, looking at confidence as a long-term project rather than, "I'm only as good as my last leg," for example. That's the danger that I see athletes get into. Let me see here...

KERRY: Just run through one more of those for us. That was great.

DR. COHN: Well, I'm a big believer that you have to, in order to execute your race plan, you have to focus on the process, OK? This kind of goes along with my initial formula - high confidence, no expectations, set manageable objectives. Well the manageable objectives, we can talk about some of those, are related to focusing on the process. If you go into a race and you're too worried about the end results, who are you going to beat? Who's going to beat you? It's kind of this pecking order, I call it in racing, where you put guys on a pedestal ahead of you. "I can't beat him" or "I can't beat her" and you focus too much on the outcome. That's down the road. That's way too far down the road.

You need to focus on not getting your mind past the start of the race. And that's it. Then take it one stroke at a time. Take it one step at a time. That's so critical and we talk about that so much in sports psychology. It's easy to say to everyone out there but I know it's very, very difficult to implement that. It's very, very difficult. I'll just give you a couple of ideas here. What you want to do is you want to break it down and each leg of the race, you can do it section by section, but let's just talk about each leg, you want to focus on, "What is it that I need to do to execute my best in the swim? What is it that I need to do to execute my best in the bike? What is it that I need to do to execute my best in the run?"

You break it down into what I call performance cues. I'm trying to give some real tangible strategies or instruction here. Performance cues are the

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little things that you need to focus on. Maybe your cadence or your turnover in the bike, for example. Or maybe your strategy about how you're going to go out. You're going to go out strong and then settle back or is there going to be another strategy. Something specific to your performance that's going to help you focus on one section of the course at a time. Is that making sense Kerry?

KERRY: Yeah, it makes perfect sense. It does. It does, indeed. So you hear people out there say it's 90 percent mental and 10 percent physical and things like that. Where do you stand on that? What are your thoughts on that?

DR. COHN: It depends where you are with your physical skills, obviously. The highest level certainly, I would say, gets very, very mental - 80 percent mental and 20 percent preparation and physical. But for newbies out there, people that are just starting to get into this sport, I would say it's more weighted on the other end because you haven't fully developed your VO2 Max or you haven't fully developed your flexibility or your strength and endurance that you need to perform your best or at your peak potential.

I'm a big believer that you've got to have the basic skills down, especially in this sport. You've got to have the endurance down and be able to get to your VO2 Max, be able to train right. And then the mental game is going to kick in. That's what's going to separate people that are going to get the most out of their ability, whatever that is, right? I'm not saying if you have a good mental game everybody's going to in and everybody should win. That's not it. The ideal of the mental game is to be able to perform up to your peak potential in terms of what your physical game will allow you at that point in time. Right?

KERRY: Yeah.

DR. COHN: So you certainly don't want to finish tenth if your potential is the top three. Right? That's where the mental game comes in. It allows you or brings you along and it helps you get to that point where what you're capable of.

KERRY: Sure. All right, excellent. When should athletes begin to prepare mentally for a race? How long? Should they do it every day? Do they do it in their training? What are your suggestions?

DR. COHN: I'm a big believer that sports psychology and mental coaching is not a quick fix. It's in no way a quick fix. I don't have any magic dust. As a matter of fact, the minimum I take for my personal coaching students is three months. I do three months, I do six months and I do twelve-month programs. The reason being is it's continual education over the course of half a season, or a full season, or a half year, or whatever the time horizon

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is. So in terms of the mental preparation, you can actually start weeks ahead of time to mentally prepare for a big race.

Mental preparation is kind of a loaded term for me because it can mean that it's your mental preparation that you do each and every week, each and every day, whether it's visualization or whether it's deciding on your race strategy or whether it's learning to concentrate better when you hit the wall. So it includes a lot of things that brings you along to be a better racer.

Then there's the pre-race preparation. Now the pre-race mental preparation, to me, begins just before your warm-up or during your warm-up. Really it's what I call that 'warm-up routine' that you have. That ritual, that habit that you go through to get yourself warmed up, to get your game-face on in the race. So I can say really 45 minutes to an hour ahead of the race is when you're going through your preparation and getting your game-face on.

KERRY: OK. All right. What's the number one mental strategy that you teach all your students that they can follow and apply in races.

DR. COHN: That's a tough one because it's very individualized in terms of the athletes that I work with. Some athletes need to pay attention to their focus and where they bring their attention to. Some athletes need to pay attention to their energy level and their intensity. Other athletes need to make sure that they're not doubting themselves if they get passed. All of a sudden they go, "Gees, I must be stinking it up" and the start doubting themselves. So it varies within individuals.

I think if we're talking about one important mental strategy that you have, that you set, manageable objectives for yourself when you go out into the race and you have objectives for each and every leg of the race, maybe each and every section of the race, of how you're going to take that wicked hill in the bike, for example. What's the strategy for that? What's the objective that you want to focus on that's going to help you focus in the process? That's so critical because it's all about being in the present moment. It's the easiest thing to say for me to my students, but it's often the most difficult thing for them to apply, to stay in the moment where you are, right here, right now.

Obviously, you want a race plan. You want a strategy of how you're going to attack the course, but at the same time you have to do that on a section by section basis and not get ahead of yourself and not dwell on your transition. If your transition didn't go the way you wanted it obviously you don't want your mind back on the transition, analyzing what you're doing.

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So for those reasons I like my students to mentally prepare, to have a race plan but also to have some objectives. Not a lot, I'm not talking about six or ten things that you're going to do during the race. Maybe one mental game objective like, "I want to stay focused in the present moment right here, right now. Forget about the future, forget about the past." And maybe one performance objective that you want to initiate. Maybe it's some type of a cadence or some type of rhythm or turnover on the bike or something that you want to accomplish. Those are what I call manageable objectives. I use other terms. I call them mini-goals.

So I'm a big believer in having mini-goals and objectives, but I'm very much against expectations, which you attach numbers to and you judge yourself based upon those expectations. If you don't achieve that time or that split time, then things can blow up for you pretty quickly and you can lose confidence, get frustrated. There's a lot of bad things that can happen when you place those really strict expectations on yourself. For example, split times and then you're no where near that split time and you're going, "Oh, what's going on? Am I doing something wrong? Am I underperforming? Why am I getting passed?" You can see where I'm going with this that at the core, basic, mental skills you have to throw away the expectations, the judgments, the demands that you place upon yourself and the judgments you're making throughout the race about performance and you have to focus your mind on performance cues, on manageable objectives. I hope I'm being clear enough.

KERRY: I think that was very clear. Also, if people out there are interested in getting more information on any of this stuff you can go to his website and that's at www.peaksports.com. He's got a great series called "The Confident Athlete" series. You can find that on there. Is that right Patrick?

DR. COHN: Yeah. We started with "The Confident Athlete." It applies to all sports. It's not specific to racing. We started with "The Confident Athlete" and it was so popular that I said, "OK, great. What would be the next logical step?" Then we did "The Focused Athlete." People were gobbling up "The Focused Athlete." Then we did "The Composed Athlete." Then I did "The Fearless Athlete." Then we just did "The Relaxed Athlete." So they all address different issues that athletes have. Huge issues, the focus, confidence, composure, the trust. Those are the buzzwords that I talk about every day with my students.

KERRY: Sure, sure. Why don't you tell us a little bit about what types of mental skills that you include in your pre-race mental preparation and how you go about that.

DR. COHN: OK. So, for every part of your physical warm-up and your physical preparation, whether it's putting your gear on or doing your stretching or

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whatever type of warm-up routine that you have, for every stage of that there should be an associated mental component. What I mean by that is your warm-up routine obviously is to get warmed up. It's to get your gear straight. It's to get your bike set up. It's to get everything ready for the race. But what most athletes neglect is, what about warming up your mind? So for every stage of that physical warm-up there should be a mental step to that. Do you want me to go through and talk about those stages that I talked about in your pre-race warm-up?

KERRY: Yeah, that'd be great. If you're willing to do that, that'd be awesome.

DR. COHN: OK. So the first step that I talk about is what I call "entering the role." Entering the role is you have to transform yourself into this warrior triathlete. You're going to go out and expend a lot of energy. You're going to be pooped at the end. You want to give it your all so you have to transform into the athlete, the warrior athlete.

What that means is, we have different roles in our lives that we all have, whether you're a spouse or a brother or a sister or a son or a daughter or a student or you have this other fulltime career, you have different roles. Sometimes athletes can't separate those. Like students that I work with, they'll take out onto the course with them, they'll have things like, "I have this term paper to do." Or, "Man, I've got to study for these tests." Those become mental drags for you when you're out racing. So the first thing is to enter the role of the athlete. When you start to get your gear on you're transforming. The example that I use, Kerry, is "The Gladiator." I love to watch "The Gladiator." I've seen it like six times. It's inspirational. There's one thing that he does before he goes into battle. There's two personas - there's the guy in the ring and there's the guy outside the ring. I can't remember, Russell Crowe's the actor, I believe.

KERRY: Yeah, yeah.

DR. COHN: He goes through a ritual before he goes into the ring. Did you see the movie Kerry?

KERRY: Yeah, I did. I did.

DR. COHN: Do you remember what he does before he goes into the ring?

KERRY: Oh man, it's probably been four years since I've seen it. Did he do something with the dirt?

DR. COHN: Yeah, there you go! Yeah, he picks up the dirt and he starts rubbing it in his hands. You can see he gets his game-face on. This is his transformation. He's stopping being Mr. Nice Guy and now he's going to

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go out and kick some serious butt. Right?

KERRY: Yeah.

DR. COHN: So when I say “enter the role of the athlete” that’s what I’m talking about. You have to transform yourself. You can be yourself but it’s a transformation in the essence that you’re parking some of the things in your life. You’re letting go of that schoolwork or those tests or some of the things that you may have in your career or squabbles with a boyfriend or girlfriend or whatever. You’re dropping those issues and parking them and now you’re committing to this role that you’re going to be in as a triathlete or as a runner, whatever the race is. So that’s the very first step. When you start to get on your gear you transform into that person. Have you ever felt that, Kerry, when you were doing some of your races? Do you ever feel like, “OK, I’m getting my game-face on. I’m putting my suit on. I feel like a different person.”

KERRY: Oh yeah, definitely. Definitely. When I put on my tri-suit I feel like Superman. [laughs]

DR. COHN: Seriously, right?

KERRY: Yeah. No, I do. I feel good when I put my stuff on. Definitely.

DR. COHN: Yeah, you feel completely like a different person. You’re the same person but it’s like, “Oh yeah!” And I love that imagery that you just mentioned. It’s like, “OK, now I’m Superman Triathlete.” That’s perfectly appropriate. It’s certainly OK to toot your own horn. You know what I mean by that?

KERRY: Yeah, absolutely. Be your own best friend.

DR. COHN: Be your own best friend, toot your own horn. “I’m the best thing out here.” It’s perfectly OK. That’s part of the mental preparation that we can talk about too, that you need to go through as well. The steps that I call it, to get you mentally prepared.

I’ve already mentioned one of the other steps. I guess I could say I’ve already mentioned one of the other steps and that is the whole idea of setting process goals. I call them process goals or mini-goals. What are the cues that you’re going to focus on. This is the time you want to reconnect, in your warm-up. You can do it while you’re stretching. You can do it while you’re getting your wetsuit on. Whatever the situation is, wherever you are in your warm-up routine you can recommit to, “OK, what am I going to focus on in the first leg? What are my cues for the bike? What are my cues for the run? I want to reconnect with one or two process goals

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that I want to focus on that are going to help me get more into execution and have that process focus.” So I talked about that aspect.

The other area, which really comes into play for racing, I think, is, you might have a plan or a strategy by the time you even get to that point of the warm-up routine, but it’s also a time to recommit. You’ve studied the course, you know what the conditions are, the water conditions, you know what the wind conditions are, maybe you’re going to be in the bike, and the hills and the flats. So you’ve studied the course, you know what the conditions are going to be. You can now solidify your game plan. I call it game plan, translation “race plan.” Right?

KERRY: Exactly.

DR. COHN: Your strategy. What’s your strategy going to be in each leg? That’s so critical. But what’s more important Kerry, that I think people don’t get, is get committed. Get committed to what you’re going to do in the swim. Don’t be waffling back and forth between two different plans, two different strategies that you have in your mind and go, “Well, we’ll just wait and see how the water is and see how much draft is out there before I really commit to a plan.” No. Don’t make your plan reactive. You want to start with a plan but then have alternates that you need to go to, right? So I’m a huge believer in pick a plan, pick a strategy for how you’re going to go out on that first leg of the race, for example, and then stick to it. If you need to deal with adversity or you need to modify, that’s fine. But you want to go out there committed to a plan right from the start.

How many times have you gone out there Kerry and you were indecisive about what you were going to do on the swim and you were waffling back and forth and it cost you?

KERRY: Um, yeah. I’ve definitely had issues like that, yeah.

DR. COHN: OK. I don’t mean to put you on the spot there.

KERRY: OK. Let’s do it. [laughs]

DR. COHN: Let everybody think you’re a mental midget. We know, you’re strong mentally. That’s why you had me on, to talk about the mental stuff. But it happens to everybody. You don’t get committed and then that sends mixed signals to the body. OK?

KERRY: Yeah.

DR. COHN: I’ve already alluded to the other what I call mental preparation area and that is being proactive with your confidence. Why don’t I talk about some

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more specifics about how you can be proactive with your confidence?

I often ask my students, “If you were to put together a confidence resume, what would that look like?” That’s what I call it, a confidence resume. What would you have on that resume? What would be your strengths on that resume? What would be the things that you’re very proud of? What about other people or support staff that you have, other trainers that help you along the way, other coaches? All of those things can be in your confidence resume. What I do is I ask my students to build to this confidence resume and then I ask them to review it, at least in their head, or on paper, in their warm-up. So that’s one way to be proactive.

Another way is we talk about self-talk. Self-talk is just making sure you’re talking positive to yourself. Like you said earlier Kerry, “I feel like Superman.” Or, “I’m going to kick some butt.” Or, “I’ve practiced really hard and I’ve trained my butt off for this. I’m ready to go.” That’s just an example of controlling your self-talk, throwing in some power-words, some things that make you feel powerful, that make you feel confident and ready.

I talked about doubts earlier. Doubt is the opposite of confidence. You have to be able to shoot down those doubts. If you go out there and you have any inclination, any question marks in your head, that’s a doubt. Going, “How are I going to hold up today in the swim? It’s not my best leg. How am I going to hold up out there?” That’s a doubt. You’re cutting down and undermining your confidence when you have those subtle question marks in your head.

Another one we talk about, and I’m not huge on mental imagery and visualization, but this kind of relates to some of the other areas that I mentioned and that is, “I’d like you to visualize or experience yourself, mentally rehearse, what you’re going to do out there.” There’s various levels of that. I’ll talk about a couple of levels. One is, you want to see it just like you want to perform. You want to make it feel effortless. You want to feel strong. You want to have this great rhythm that you have when you’re racing your best. Right?

KERRY: Yeah.

DR. COHN: But on the other end, stuff happens and races don’t always go as planned. You’ve got to be able to prepare for adversity. So one of the things that I ask my students to do is to put down, “What’s going to rock your boat? What’s going to jolt you off your focus? What’s going to distract you? What are some of the things that can really upset your rhythm out there?” Then have a strategy to deal with that. I call that “anticipate and cope” in my work. It’s not always going to be rosy. You’re not always going to run

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the perfect race. Things are going to happen and you've got to be prepared to deal with those. A lot of the times in sports psychology that's one of the things that I'm doing to prepare athletes, is helping them deal with some of the adversity. It could be as simple as getting distracted by a competitor. How are you going to cope with that? Or getting passed by a couple of competitors who you think are slower than you. How are you going to deal with that? What's your approach? What's the positive approach to that?

So those are the two levels that I talk about in terms of your pre-race visualization. Number one, see the race how you want to unfold, but also be prepared and have a response ready for things that don't go as planned. Kerry, maybe you could talk to that. If you go out there and you have a great race plan ready to go and something happens where now you've got to adjust, big time. Do you have any recent examples?

KERRY: Yeah, absolutely. I had one race where my handlebars broke and I committed that I was going to finish it but I had to pull over a lot. I had another race where I had a flat tire and that was pretty much my day, because I didn't bring any, I didn't mentally prepare enough to bring an extra tube or anything like that. [laughs] So there we go. Those are two examples that come to mind pretty fast.

DR. COHN: Yeah, equipment issues. That's a big one. Even stuff beyond the equipment issues too, I think, could be thrown in there as well. Maybe other competitors. Maybe there's some issues going on with some of the groupings that are going on that aren't to your liking or something. Or maybe you're not in the right spot where you want to be at a certain part of the race and then you start panicking there. Any little thing that would upset your focus, upset your confidence, upset your composure, you want to be able to anticipate those and have some type of strategy, what I call coping strategy, so that you can race on with confidence and composure. If you think it through ahead of time number one you'll be much less surprised if it happens, and number two you won't stumble and wonder, "Well what the hell do I do now?" and panic because you've thought through that and you'll have something to go to. That's what's really important when you're challenged with adversity or equipment issues, that you have a plan in your mind about how you're going to cope with it.

Now some people will come back to me and say, "Well you're just planning for failure!" I'm like, "No you aren't, because stuff happens and you've got to be ready for anything that happens in a race." So that's part of the whole being proactive with the confidence. You want to be prepared mentally for anything that happens and you want to see those things in your mind and how you're going to react to those, as well.

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KERRY: Sure, sure.

DR. COHN: So rehearsing your performance is another, rehearsing your game plan, rehearsing your performance. Even seeing yourself out there with confidence and focus in the present. Now another huge one, well there's a couple more but the big one, I think, is, all right, so you train weeks and weeks for this one big race. You're all psyched. You're all ready to go. What often happens is, and I know you probably have a pretty advanced group out there and they know tapering and all that stuff. I know a little bit about exercise physiology, that was one of my first degrees when I was at the University of Buffalo, exercise science. Similar to your mental game is you want to kind of taper off of your mental game and now, I don't want to say taper off your mental game, I want to say now it's really time to trust your preparation and your training and not cram for the test. Often in big events, whether it's a big race that you're going to go into or whether it's a big game, whatever, big competition, athletes have a tendency to notch it up a little bit. You've probably seen athletes go in like, "OK, I'll cram for the test." They go in and they over train.

KERRY: Yeah.

DR. COHN: They're not as fresh as they need to be come race time. So I like athletes to be fresh, to be ready, and to prepare to trust. What that means is you've got to let go of the training, you've got to let go of the perfect technique, you've got to let go of judging yourself and judging how you're doing, and basically you have to commit to just focusing on carrying out your race plan with whatever style, whatever rhythm, whatever plan you can. Does that make sense?

KERRY: Yeah, it does. It makes sense.

DR. COHN: I'm sure you can talk to that as well. You don't want to over-cram for the test, over-train for the big race and then go in there and be all technical and try to run this perfect race. It's really not that way.

KERRY: Yeah. I heard a coach one time say, "You think, you stink." He was a football coach but he said that if you're in there and you're thinking all the time and you're over-thinking everything, nothing good is going to come out of that. You kind of want to be "in the zone," right?

DR. COHN: Yeah. And "in the zone" means trust. It's the difference between... I'm trying to relate it... Maybe you can help me out a little bit. When a triathlete is going to be the most technical with their skills, where are they going to be the most technical? Is it going to be in the water? Is it going to be on the bike? How are they going to go overboard with the analysis and trying to be perfect with their technique?

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KERRY: It's probably going to be swimming because most people struggle the most with swimming and there's quite a lot of technique in that. There's a lot of technique in all of them, but yeah, probably swimming. Let's say that.

DR. COHN: So when I say trust your training, you're not going to perfect it in the race. You've got to let it go. You've got to let the technique go and now you've got to find a rhythm. You've got to get on top of the water. You've got to have a different feeling than focusing on perfect technique in the water. All the perfect technique stuff comes in the training. Then in the race you need to just get it done. We call it "win ugly." Perform functionally. Get the job done any way you can. Then if you need to go back to the drawing board in your training, you can certainly do that. So yeah, that's a good example I think, when we talk about preparing to trust. You've got to get into that functional, "I'm going to win ugly and just do what works today. I'm going to perform great today. I'm not going to worry about how I'm doing." That's for those perfectionists that struggle when they make a mistake. They focus too much on the technique, as you say, in the water and having perfect technique, when it's not about that at that point in time. The technique should already be there. You should've already trained yourself to have the correct technique. Now you just go do it.

The last one, before I take another question Kerry, the last one I'll talk about is to embrace the big race butterflies. What that means is if you're feeling a little jittery and the heart's starting to beat, embrace that and say, "I'm ready. I'm pumped." Don't feel scared going into the big race. One of my mentors and good friends at Cal State Fullerton, Ken Revista, who's worked with Olympic Athletes and professional baseball, etc., he always said, "Embrace the butterflies. Get the butterflies to fly in formation." What that means is use it to your advantage. If you're not feeling pumped, if you're not feeling excited, then there's something wrong with you. Right? It's your natural reaction of your body preparing yourself to go in and do battle. Many athletes freak out, when they go into the big race they freak out because the heart's pounding a little heavier, maybe they've got sweaty palms, maybe they're feeling a little jittery. The veterans welcome that. The top guys are like, "Yeah, this is good." I know rookies or newbies in the sport are like, "What's wrong with me? I've got these butterflies going on. My heart's beating out of my chest. My shoulders feel so tense." Then that creates more worry. That creates more anxiety. So I ask my athletes to embrace that and say, "I'm ready. I'm pumped. My body's telling me, 'Let's get going.'"

KERRY: Excellent, excellent. Again, if you guys are out there listening and looking for any more of this information he's definitely got it in some of his products, "The Confident Athlete" which we were talking about. You can

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go to www.peaksports.com. One of the things I see a lot of the time training people and hearing people speak is a lot of people struggle mentally, and they think it's physically too, but a lot of it's just mental, I see, in that they're really scared of the swim. They're really scared of the water. Maybe it's because they're not confident in their skills or they don't like not being able to see the bottom, dark water. Sometimes there can be a little contact in the swim too. Those are all the kind of things. So how can people kind of get over fears that they have like that?

DR. COHN: Is it Roosevelt that said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself"?

KERRY : Yeah, yeah.

DR. COHN: Yeah, it's often the fear of the unknown that people struggle with the most in that type of a situation. And the fear really paralyzes them more than the real threat. So there's a big threat out there that people fear and that fear locks them up to the point where it makes them more anxious and more scared. I talk with my athletes, the biggest thing I try to do when talking about fear is I try to get them to rewind the mind. The anxiety and the fear is from your mind slipping away to, "This water's deep. I can't see in this water. There's some really huge, man-eating fish out here," whatever goes through the mind. It's the mind getting away from those things that I talked about earlier. It's getting ahead of yourself. It's focusing on things that are relevant. It's not focusing on what you need to in the present moment. So I approach it from a focus perspective. If you keep your mind focused in the moment on what you need to do to execute the swim, it's less likely that the fear and the anxiety is going to kick in about the what ifs. So really the what ifs often lead you down that path of anxiety. You need to refocus back on whatever it is that's your performance cues in the water, whether it's your kick, whether it's the rhythm of your stroke, whether it's your pacing, your timing, whatever it is, that's what you need to stay focused on and not let the mind wander off to those what ifs.

KERRY: Right, right. OK. Great. I've seen also sometimes where you have people that really focus on, like we were talking about before, being prepared for happens, but when does it start to become destructive? Maybe when people say, "I always have a really bad swim." Or, "I always have a really bad race on this course." Or, "The weather's not the way I want it to be so I'm going to have a bad race." Why don't you talk about that a little bit. When it's OK to mentally prepare for that and when you let it destroy you.

DR. COHN: Good point. I call those generalizations or negative self-labels. A generalization is, "I didn't perform on this course well once," and they over-generalize and think, "I struggle on this course." That's a completely different animal. Those are very, very destructive because they're at the

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core of your being and it's going to affect everything. So if you're at that course and you make a couple of mistakes and you're thinking that that's not your ideal course, or you're struggling on that course, what do you think's going to happen after a couple of mistakes?

KERRY: Yeah, right.

DR. COHN: You come in with that attitude, "Well, here I go again, screwing up this course again. This course has got my number." So it becomes quickly reinforcing if something bad happens or not something bad, if you make a little mistake here or there or get passed by a couple of guys that you feel like you shouldn't get passed by, things like that, then things can unravel quickly. So you've got to be very careful about those generalizations that you take in with you about, "I'm a slow starter. I'm a poor closer." Or, "I don't have a kick." Or, like you said, "I hate this course. This course doesn't suit me." On and on. You can imagine some of the labels and some of the generalizations that are out there. Those are really destructive.

They type of anticipation and cope I was talking about were those transient things that come up during the course of race, like blowing a tire or you fall on a corner or something, you have equipment issues in the water with your wetsuit or whatever, goggles. It's those little things that might happen during the race that you want to prepare for that can be, I call them surprises. They can kind of rock your boat a little and surprise you and you flounder and not know what to do and then you lose valuable time trying to figure out what to do.

KERRY: Yeah.

DR. COHN: What you're talking about Kerry is more deeper level at the core and you have to address those. I pride myself on working with my students and addressing those core issues and helping them overcome those.

KERRY: Sure, sure. Excellent. All right, that is good. Another question I got for you is, you see a lot of people a lot of the time, they've got talent, they want to do it and everything like that or they really want to do something but they don't do what they need to do to get there, in terms of they want to run that 5K or they want to do that triathlon but they just don't put the training time in and then they know it and they go out there and they don't have a good race because of it or whatever. What about motivation? How do you help people to stay focused and motivated towards a goal that they really want to do?

DR. COHN: I'm not huge on goal setting. I think athletes naturally go through that process. Now I will ask my students what their goals are. I'll help them modify those goals but for the most part, especially when you're talking

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about the sport of triathlon, athletes are pretty darn good with their goals and they're pretty darn committed. So I would want to know, for that athlete that you talked about that's unwilling to put in the time, what's preventing them, what's blocking them from fully committing to that training that they need to do. For example, are they just clueless and they don't understand what it takes? I have a daughter that competes in tennis, she's not a runner, she competes in tennis, she's young, she's ten and she goes up against girls that are training four hours a day, every day of the week. I try to explain to her that if you want to beat these girls you've got to train and you've got to commit yourself to training. She's just ten. She's not at that level. But what blocks their motivation? Are they just clueless, they don't know what it takes? Are they overconfident and think if they show up that they're going to win the race? Do others tell them they've got a ton of talent and they don't need to be proactive? I know some athletes out there feel like they have god-given talent and no matter how much they train and practice that they're not going to improve. So you have some of that going on. Maybe you could talk to that through your dealings with some of the students that you train. What are some of the things that undermine that motivation?

KERRY: Confidence. A lot of the time I don't think they realize how much an athlete puts in sometimes, to do what they want to do. For instance, I run into guys in our sport, Iron Man Hawaii, qualifying for that is the Holy Grail for a lot of people. It's a tremendous life commitment to do one of those and it might take years to hit that. I don't know if they always see it. Maybe they have a bad race and they don't think they can do it. Those are kind of some of the things I've seen. I don't know. What are your thoughts on that?

DR. COHN: They get discouraged you mean about actually being able to train that hard and to make it there, to qualify?

KERRY: Yeah. It depends on the person, like you were saying. It's individual with a lot of this stuff. They might always find an excuse why they can't train. What do you think about this - I read a lot of the time that injuries are mental? You get people going up to a race and boom, all of a sudden they get an injury or they get sick or they get freaked out. How much of that do you think is a mental type of thing? That might be something that I see that gets in the way with people going out and having a good race? For instance, for qualifying for Hawaii, you've got to qualify for that.

DR. COHN: What they say in a sport like triathlon where you have to be as fit as you can possibly be and you're training a lot and there's the potential there for injuries. It's almost like in order to feel like you've done your best it's almost like you've got to go in there feeling so strong and so rested and not having any little tweak going on. It's almost like, is it a little tweak or

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is it a real injury, an overtraining injury? I will say I know athletes, and you may have some listeners out there that are one of those, that if they create excuses why it's OK to fail, injury is one of those excuses, then you've already defeated yourself before you go out there. I talk about that with my students. You can't have any built-in excuses - injuries or shin splints or tweaks or whatever - that are going to predetermine your attitude going into the race. That's just a recipe for failure, if you've got pre-made excuses, ready to go, to tell people why you failed. Not a good approach.

KERRY: Yeah, yeah. Sure. All right. Good stuff. Then the last thing I'm going to ask you is, this is actually about Tiger Woods. I think listening to that guy speak is pretty amazing. It seems like a lot of the time he's pretty on, mentally. I've noticed, I don't know if you've picked this up, but a lot of the time when they're like, "Why do you think you played so bad on the back nine?" He's just like, "Yeah, I made a lot of good putts back there and I think I did really good at this, did really good at that." They'll be like, "Where did you mess up on this? What did you think about when you messed up on this?" And he's like, "Well, I did this right. I did that right." He doesn't really ever acknowledge, a lot of the time, those mistakes or whatever. I just wanted to get your opinion on that because I think it's pretty interesting and just wanted to see what you think about that.

DR. COHN: Well, a couple of things there. You've got to remember that there's the public persona that he wants to portray and there's probably a personal persona that's a little bit different. Is he being genuine? Yeah, he's being genuine. On the flip side it's also probably a reflection of his attitude. He wants to be as positive as he can with himself. I often tell my students that if you focus on the negative, you focus on what you did wrong and you beat yourself up for it, you're only going to sink your confidence. Growing confidence is about focusing on what you're doing well, building upon that and then making sure you're training for your weaknesses and addressing your weaknesses. So that's how I'd answer. I think a little bit of that is media-driven and being in the public eye. He wants to put out a positive persona. But it might also be a reflection of his attitude. He wants to be very positive with himself and really not look at mistakes and not dwell on mistakes.

KERRY: Good deal. Again people, if you want to look at any of Patrick's stuff you can go to his website at www.peaksports.com. His "Confident Athlete" series may be a good place to start. Would you say that's about right?

DR. COHN: Yes. There's free downloads. You can download some stuff on pre-game mistakes. We talked about some of those tonight, pre-game mistakes. You can download that. It's a PDF. You can sign up for, I've got podcasts. I'm always podcasting. I've got a ton of sports psychology videos, free videos you can watch. You can go to iTunes and search for 'sports psychology podcast' and you'll find me there. Search my name under iTunes if you

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like podcasting. I do a bunch of sports psychology podcasts. So lots of ways to improve your mental game. I do personal coaching with my students as well, plus I have the products that you mentioned, the “Confident Athlete” series.

KERRY: Good deal. That’s great. Thank you so much for coming on here and taking the time to be with us and sharing some great insight. I know for myself and the people I coach, I’ve definitely learned some great things and I’m sure everyone else out there has as well. It was a pleasure.

DR. COHN: Excellent. Thanks for the great questions Kerry.

KERRY: All right. Have a good one. All right guys, that closes it out for tonight. Again, I’m Kerry Sullivan with The Triathlon Summit. If you want any more information on how you can get some more of these interviews you can www.triathlonsummit.com. That is that. Hope you all have a great night and I look forward to having you guys on a call in the near future. Thank you very much.