

# The Balancing Act in Your Mind

From the staff at the Trials Training Center

With apologies to Geoff Aaron of the Balancing Act video fame, this article is about the balancing act that goes on in your head when you ride. And we don't mean your natural ability to balance, rather we are talking about your ability to focus your mind to get the best out of your riding. With the right mental attitude and practice you can not only ride better, but develop your skills at concentrating and focusing and have fun while doing it. Here are some ideas about the mental game of trials.

- 1) ***Play to win.*** You might be thinking, of course I play to win, how else could you play? Some people play to not lose, ride with the idea to not make a 5 or to not take a dab. Playing to win means to think in a positive way and to have a winning attitude, a positive emotion as a supplement to talent and an expectation of winning. When confronted with a difficult section, a winning attitude is to consider this an opportunity to test your abilities and gain points against your opponents with a successful ride. Riding in a class below your ability as a rider (i.e., "sandbagging") is a way of being comfortable and secure in your riding without subjecting yourself to the emotional and physical stress of difficult competition. This is ok if your objective is a relaxing day of riding and nothing wrong with that, but it will not develop your skill and will not foster a winning mindset. A rider who is playing to win will seek out a challenge and take the risk associated with competition. One of the reasons Michael Jordan was such a great basketball player was that he was not afraid to take the shot at the buzzer with the game on the line. Fear of failure can make such a shot infinitely more difficult, and a positive winning attitude is essential to perform at your best when the chips are down.
- 2) ***Know your assets and liabilities.*** You should try to use your assets to maximize your success, and practice to reduce your liabilities. It doesn't help to pick out a great line in a section if it requires hopping and you cannot hop without dabbing. Likewise, it is foolish to try something that is clearly beyond your ability and could result in a dangerous crash. If you understand your liabilities you can develop a plan to improve in the areas in which you are weak, or to turn a liability into an asset. For instance, if you recognize that one of your liabilities is that you lack confidence, then work to identify successes in your riding to develop your self confidence; focus on something that you did really well and take pride in that success.
- 3) ***Set winning goals.*** Set long term goals as well as intermediate and short term goals that are steps to achieving the long term goals. Write them down, or share them with a riding partner so that you are accountable to follow through. If your long term goal is to ride competitively in the Expert class in your club or to ride a national, identify the skills necessary to achieve that goal and set some short term goals to master those skills in a logical and realistic fashion. And take some pride in accomplishment of your short term goals so that you maintain a winning spirit in the process!
- 4) ***Focus.*** It's a common thing to hear a rider explain a bad ride by saying that they didn't stay focused or they had a lapse of concentration. Focusing is a critical part of all sports, and a skill that is essential for a trials rider. In order to focus you must first identify the most critical thing, and then focus on what is to be accomplished rather than on what is to be avoided. In riding a section, you should identify those specific key points at which you should place your tire or perform a specific maneuver. Concentrate on what to do rather than on what NOT to do; if you are worried about a

hitting a rock and your attention is on that rock, then your eyes tend to look at the rock and take you towards it (target fixation). Always try to maintain a focus on the positive thing that you are to be doing. When riding a section, you cannot be thinking about how important it is to clean this section, your mind must be focused on putting your wheel at this spot, keeping your weight outside the bike in this turn, weight shift to lift the front wheel here, etc. You know, all the things you heard at Trials Training Days!

- 5) **Visualize.** Mental practice is important. Before riding a section, play a mental tape in your mind of you riding the section in exactly the way that you planned, with particular attention to the visual cues that you will use to focus during your ride. Break down the various parts of your ride and always see yourself riding correctly. Mentally execute the correct techniques and point those out to yourself when playing out your mental practice. Visualize at the actual speed you will be riding, don't omit parts and don't fast forward through anything. Don't ever muddle your way through anything and don't store incorrect material in your mind. Work to develop total confidence, mental consistency and focus on execution.
- 6) **Develop recovery skill.** There will inevitably be lapses or failures in execution. No matter what your sport, you must learn to recover from adversity and recover quickly. One of the attributes of Geoff Aaron and Doug Lampkin is their incredible ability to recover from a bad ride and turn in excellent performance. The keys to recovering are to quickly and dispassionately analyze the mistake, define the error and develop a plan to correct it next time, and move on with confidence to the next section. It is absolutely essential to recovery that the mistake is dealt with promptly and resolved so that lingering doubts do not remain and you don't beat yourself up mentally about the mistake. If you carry emotional baggage from a bad ride to the next section, you may let it affect your ability to focus and visualize a successful ride in the next section and a mistake can be multiplied. A bad call by an official can sometimes happen, but you must be able to recover from these adversities without letting the emotions carry over and affect your ability to execute. Ever see the bumper sticker that says "I do what the voices in my head tell me to do"? Clear your mind before the next section! Even during practice, it is unproductive to continue to practice making the same mistake over and over, stop and analyze. If you lack a skill to be able to execute the section properly, make a plan to develop the needed skill rather than practicing the incorrect technique.
- 7) **Balance yourself on the edge.** Emotions and stress can be a good thing. The stress of competition helps to spur you to greater levels of achievement and skill. If you only practiced without the stress of competition and the emotional charge that provides, then you would never feel the thrill of a well executed ride under the pressure of competition in front of your friends and competitors. You may relax between sections or during a break, but you must work to find your mental balance point during the competition. Your emotions help to charge you up and help you to be totally focused on the task at hand to the exclusion of everything else. To be on the emotional edge without going over means that your emotions are in control so that you are not so nervous or stressed that your performance suffers. The keys to stay on the edge without going over are in the items listed above. You must maintain a positive attitude and "play to win", know and have confidence in your ability, focus and visualize and thereby direct your emotional energy toward a positive end. And you should always keep it fun and enjoy your accomplishments.

Maybe you won't be a many times national champion or have anyone mistake you for Geoff, but you will get a great sense of accomplishment and enjoyment in your riding when you get your mental game in balance. And if you remember these tips you will be on your way to better riding and developing a positive winning attitude!

A special acknowledgement is made to Dr. Jack Llewellyn, noted sports psychologist to the Atlanta Braves baseball team, and author of several books on coaching and the mental aspects of sports.