

<http://www.graciemag.com/>

21.11.2005

## Mental Toughness

### Martin helps you train your mind

by Martin Rooney



A number of years ago, a sports psychologist I worked with asked me to define mental toughness for him. Strangely enough, the concept of mental toughness seems easy to think, but very difficult to define. I came up with a number of different thoughts on mental toughness for him, but none were a solid description. Over the last few months, I have been meeting with different high level athletes and trainers, trying to better understand the problem, but no one had one clear answer. During my time here as a trainer, I have seen many of us experiment with the concept of mental toughness on the athletes. Over this time, I have tried to develop tests and certain sessions around the concept of mental toughness to not only help the athlete to understand it, but for me to get a better picture as well. Through this, meeting with athletes and trainers on the subject as well as reading a number of books on the subject, I have come to some general conclusions about this type of training. Mental toughness is a personal, persevering decision. You can view this in an athlete's desire to continue exercise, even when passing through higher and higher levels of fatigue. When I

began to experiment with athletes and myself with fatigue, I came to see some interesting results. I used to believe that everything about fatigue could be defined physiologically. I used to watch the kids on the track and almost envision the physiological mechanisms that were running out to stop the athlete from performing.

There are 4 physiological mechanisms of fatigue that I am concerned with. Depletion of the energy systems, inadequacy of the circulatory and respiratory systems, body temperature elevation, and dehydration can all lead to fatigue. As I read more about these mechanisms I saw that all of them had their shortcomings. How do I then explain the marathon runner that can run 4 minute mile pace with a heart rate of 200? How do I explain the man who, at risk of death, was able to tread water for 40 hours until he was rescued? How do you watch a fighter continue for over an hour and never give in? Surely their systems would of run out. Further still, how do I explain the fact that other racers in that marathon had the same potential physiologically, but couldn't keep up? Or what about the other two treaders that could not stay above water and were lost at sea? Why does the fighter who is still fresher than his opponent just give up? There is one explanation. Mental toughness stems from the interaction of the mind and the body.

Mental toughness can be seen as desire or willpower. I have watched athletes persevere through levels of pain that others are not willing to endure. These athletes all have a level of excellence set much higher than that of other athletes. I noticed from my conversations with elite athletes that they all had the wisdom of delayed gratification. They were all ready to pay the price hard now, for the prize that might even rest years from now. The interesting part was that the prize was very different for all the athletes. I think it is very important for the athlete to know themselves and to know what it is they are really after.

I asked a top level track and field athlete how he could be ranked top 10 in the world for the last 6 years, but could never crack the top five. His answer was interesting. He believed he had the talent and the skill to be number one in the world, but at that moment whenever it was time, mentally, there was something missing. He felt that during his upbringing in this country that his mom would console him too much. For instance, she would bake a cake when things didn't go well and show him everything would be alright. The top athlete in his event for the last 8 years, he contended, was from a brutally tough country in which you fought for everything you ever had. This was the mental edge he had all his life that made the difference.

I spoke with a nationally recognized speaker at length about the topic of mental training and he also had an interesting story to add. When he was a child he was being chased by a big dog in the neighborhood. When he got to his house, there were 8 steps that he had to clear to get inside safe. He said without even thinking he hit the bottom step perfectly, and made the jump. He thought about this even up to the present day 40 years later and didn't think he could have ever made that leap again. He believed that it is a sense of necessity that drives the athlete to superperformance. Something inside the athlete, whether it is his need to win, his life is at stake, money, or the applause of the crowd, the necessity is there. This is what the athlete must decide for himself and believe in it. Without some need, the athlete eventually will not succeed at the highest level. Interesting studies have been performed on sedentary and professional athletes and their ability to withstand exertion. Sedentary people always gave up early, with no signs of really approaching any true fatigue. The professional athletes, on the other hand, were able to withstand huge amounts of work and continue to go on.