

# The game plan – Book review by Hilary Cave

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A month or so ago my boss lent me a book, he said he thought it might be a useful read before 'the big race'. Initially I thought the bit in the title about mental toughness at work was just a dig to get me to focus more on my job and less on training, but after reading a few pages and quotes from famous athletes I was soon totally absorbed. I was able to transfer the tips for mental toughness at work to my race preparation and then onto the race.



The book is called 'The Game Plan – Your guide to Mental Toughness at Work' – its by a guy called Steve Bull who is the consultant psychologist to the England Cricket Team, he has also worked with many other sports teams including English Olympians.

Steve divides Mental Toughness into four 'types': Turnaround Toughness, Critical Moment Toughness, Endurance Toughness and Risk Management Toughness. If an athlete (or someone at work) can manage these four aspects then this will lead to Self Belief, Clear Thinking and Resilience which are the three factors he thinks are directly related to peak performance.

Turnaround Toughness is all about regaining self belief when things are going badly, the need to move on when things have not been going well e.g. bouncing back after failing to get a new job which you think you deserve...or competing again after racing badly.

Steve has three tips for helping people recognise and understand the need for turnaround toughness:

Tip 1: Adopt an athletes mindset – basically this is the Performance cycle that we are familiar with at Complete performance: Prepare – Execute – Review. You can't just go go go all the time you need to stop and reflect (fill in the 'Event review' worksheet) and prepare the next event.

Tip 2: Reconnect with previous success – People can get trapped into a cycle of low confidence if things go wrong. Steve has a great Confidence Peaks chart that provides evidence to people that they have climbed many peaks in their lives and can do so again.

I found this a useful exercise. I drew my own 12 mountain peaks on paper and in each peak wrote a time when I had performed really well in either training or racing multisport, I even had things like running really fast in the Thames Valley secondary schools cross country in 1981! Because I didn't have much time before my race I reflected on this chart every few days and tried to picture as much detail about each success as I could.

Tip 3: Learn and move on – (or remember and forgive). "Learn something and move on and focus on the next challenge. Don't get bogged down dwelling in a past sub optimal performance." (page 44)

I hadn't really thought much about this tip until during the practice race a few weeks before the big race, I got pulled over and made to get off my bike for one minute for drafting, (I do remember they told us not to draft in the pre race briefing!). As I stood there getting madder and madder I knew there must be one of these 'toughness tips' I could call upon ...I got back on my bike and after a little curse to the man on the motorbike told myself to get over it and focus on going like stink till I finished...

Critical Moment Toughness is all about delivering and performing under pressure. Steve has three tips to help with this:

Tip 4: Control the Controllables – If you don't remember anything else remember this: "The only thing I can control is myself; my equipment and my performance" Alex Coomber-Bronze Medallist 2002 Winter Olympics.

(page 51/52) To help identify what your controllables are Steve has a useful framework to use, breaking goals into Outcome goals, Performance goals and Process goals. I used this framework when preparing for the big race to help me figure out what things I could control. Here are my goals for the big race:

## GOAL TYPE

### OUTCOME GOAL (The WHY) .

To come in top 5 veteran women. To enjoy the race

### PERFORMANCE GOAL (The WHAT)

Improve time by 30 mins on last year (which would put me in top 5)

To be smiling in 80% of the photos

### PROCESS GOALS (The HOW) These I can control – my controllables

#### Pre race:

Follow the training plan

Complete the practice races

Work on bike and kayak skills

Practice transitions

Check my gear thoroughly.

#### During race:

Stay calm in any little mishap....

Stay focussed on bike and kayak

Steady pace on run, do my own thing.

Smile at each camera.



Tip 5: See and think success – “Positive visualisation. It has been called ‘going to the movies and it may be the most important part of your mental package’. Ray Floyd, past winner of PGA and US open golf tournaments. (page 62)

Avoid ‘don’t and I can’t’ statements – catch yourself, as you are about to say them. Once again these bits of advice were invaluable both preparing for and during the race, (I am surprised how often I say “I can’t”). During the big race I paddled along saying (quietly so I didn’t sound like a nutter) “I can, I can, keep paddling I can, I can keep paddling...”

Endurance Toughness is about staying physically strong and being able to think clearly when you are physically tired and busy. Endurance Toughness is explained in:

Tip 6: Manage Your Energy –“The key to unlocking your potential.” (page 77) Basically this is all about exercising, eating well and relaxing. The key one here for me was relaxing, I certainly exercise enough and eat well, so the few weeks before the big race I had a half hour ‘garden time’ every evening – to me this is a calming place to be and helped me to relax.

Tip 7: Manage Your Outlook – How your state of mind can have an influence on your body. This section deals with three facets of optimism, highlights and perspective. It is about how having an optimistic outlook on life has a positive effect on dealing with setbacks and on our immune system. Steve has good suggestions on how to challenge our own disposition and to look for daily highlights in our lives. I found the last three points on ‘The Game Plan for Endurance Toughness’ list quite helpful (page 115), identifying current challenges where I need to show more optimism, identifying daily highlights and recognising triggers for losing perspective. I found this whole section (tip 7) quite difficult, and think now the big race is out of the way I should take the time to revisit it.

Risk Management Toughness is about being confident enough to make difficult decisions under pressure, knowing when to take the risky option.... e.g. to go with the fast bunch or not?

Tip 8: Seek Out the Challenge – “When you are excited about the competition or having to prove your self under pressure you will approach risk management with more confidence. You are more focussed on the enjoyment of success rather than the fear of failure. Being motivated by fear of failure is not generally a recipe for mental toughness” (page 118) it’s about spending some time out of the comfort zone.

Since reading this I have given some thought to how often I seek out new challenges (not really very often I have decided as it is very cosy in my comfort zone). For me the ‘Teva Big Day at the office’ race was a big challenge when I did leave my slippers and mug of milo behind, I had never done a race that long, with so many transitions in one day and I wasn’t sure I could do it. I found that as I was well prepared and organised for the race, the challenge was still there but it felt exciting instead of a gut wrenching epic.

Feedback comes in here and managing your reactions to feedback. Steve points out that top-level performers are always seeking feedback as they realise how important it is to performance improvement. He has an acronym ‘SADRAA’ (Shock, Anger, Denial, Rationalisation, Acceptance, Action) to help you recognise the stages you might go through when you get negative feedback that you don’t agree with (page125).

Tip 9: Reframe your appraisal – “This is the understanding that it is not the environment alone which causes stress but the way in which people interact with it...if people can change their appraisal of a stressful situation and enhance their belief that they can cope, then their stress will dissipate” (page 130) Change the way we think about a stressful situation and we can change the emotional reaction we have to it...and our self confidence.



Steve has some useful ideas for challenging our appraisal processes but I found it quite a big section to try and absorb and implement before the big race. I realised I have numerous bad habits and it was going to take longer than a few weeks, it became a bit overwhelming.

So I tried to use a couple of the glaringly obvious ones, in particular: ‘Reframing negative statements’. I tried really hard to use only positive thoughts in my head e.g. Instead of “the Minga river flats are hard as the rocks roll under my feet and my legs are tired” (last years thought), I used “the river flats and little rocks are my speciality – I just take quick little steps over the rocks, I’m almost there”.

Lastly Steve talks about The Winning Environment where he explains Tip 10.

Tip 10: Create Your Own Winning Environment. It’s important to turn up with a smile on your face. There are three parts of this: The role thing – you need to be absolutely clear as to your role, playing to your strengths – what are you really good at, what skills and attributes have got you where you are? Enjoying the ride – when people are enjoying themselves it is a lot easier to feel confident and perform well.

I thought about this last one when I was making my goals for the big race, I wanted to have fun and enjoy myself – hence the ‘smiling in 80% of the photos’ goal....this worked! I made an effort to smile and enjoy myself and I DID feel more confident and relaxed and perform well.

I probably sound like some sort of zealous convert to self help books (and believe me there are a lot of them on our office book shelf), but 'The Game Plan' was a timely and helpful read for me. The language was easy to understand, the tasks and chapter summaries achievable and concise. Instead of stories of ardent fish mongers (like in the last book they gave me to read at work) the stories from the athletes struck a chord I could hear and motivated me to think and act on my mental toughness – it's been a long time coming.

All quotes are from 'The Game Plan – Your Guide to Mental Toughness at Work' by Steve Bull. Published by Capstone Publishing Ltd. 2006

Visit Steve's website [www.gameplancoach.com](http://www.gameplancoach.com)