

TOLERANCE TO FATIGUE AND PAIN

II



THE CHAMPION'S MINDSET

THE FOUR SEASONS OF MENTAL PREPARATION

TOLERANCE TO FATIGUE AND PAIN II

Petra Majdič, a Slovenian cross-country skier, was doing her routine warm-ups at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics when an unseen ravine swallowed her, leaving her with four fractured ribs and a punctured lung. In agony that would sideline most, Majdič made the audacious decision to compete in the sprint race.

Each breath was a battle, every stride a defiance of human limits. Yet, through sheer willpower and unrelenting grit, she skied her way to a bronze medal. As she crossed the finish line, victory wrested from pain, she collapsed, the extent of her injuries now heartbreakingly evident. Her indomitable spirit and unparalleled resolve immortalized her as one of the most heroic figures in Olympic history, a testament to the extraordinary feats the human spirit can achieve when the odds seem insurmountable.

Super-champions constantly push the limits of their physical and mental capacities, making the ability to tolerate fatigue and pain essential to achieving peak performance. Pre-competition periods often involve intense training phases that demand both physical and psychological endurance.

This chapter explores techniques and strategies designed to enhance your tolerance to fatigue and pain in the SPRING phase, including mental training, sensory adaptation practices, and self-regulation skills.

Fatigue and pain are natural, adaptive responses to the rigorous demands of training and competition. However, the sensation of fatigue and the presence of pain can become psychological barriers if not effectively managed, leading to decreased performance, reduced motivation, or even avoidance behaviors. Developing tolerance to these sensations allows us to remain focused on our goals, execute skills with precision, and ultimately expand our physical and psychological thresholds.

Research in sport psychology shows that athletes with higher pain tolerance and fatigue resilience are more likely to reach and sustain elite levels of performance, as they can engage in consistent, intensive training without succumbing to the mental drain of discomfort.

What are the sources of fatigue and pain?

1. Physical fatigue: Caused by energy depletion, lactate buildup (what a feeling!), and muscular micro-trauma. Physical fatigue can reduce strength, speed, and coordination, making it challenging to perform optimally.
2. Pain: Athletic pain typically arises from muscle exertion, strain, or impact-related injuries. Pain perception varies widely among athletes, depending on factors like experience, mental toughness, and individual pain threshold.
3. Mental Fatigue: Often less visible, mental fatigue can occur from prolonged concentration, stress, or the monotony of routine, leading to a reduction in cognitive function, focus, and motivation.

Athletes in high-performance sports benefit from learning to distinguish between productive, tolerable pain and signals of injury, as well as to manage the psychological components of fatigue.

Here are five strategies to help you strengthen your mental and physical tolerance to fatigue and pain during the SPRING period:

1. Cognitive reframing of discomfort: the aim to alter our perception of pain and fatigue by reframing discomfort as a positive sign of effort and progress rather than a signal to stop.

Here are three techniques we can use:

- a) Productive pain identification: We have to teach ourselves to identify "productive pain" that stems from muscle exertion versus "harmful pain" that signals potential injury. This will empower us to continue through challenging sensations without fear of injury.
- b) Effort Reframing: We need to associate sensations of fatigue or burning muscles with progress, growth, and endurance building. Phrases like, "This discomfort is my body adapting to get stronger" can help reframe fatigue as a signal of advancement.
- c) Focus on gains, not pains: Instead of dwelling on discomfort, shift attention to performance gains, using questions like, "How will pushing through this moment benefit my performance?"

2. Visualization and mental preparation for endurance: the objective is to use visualization techniques to mentally rehearse and build tolerance to fatigue and pain, reinforcing our confidence in our capacity to handle these sensations.

Here are another three techniques we can use:

- a) Endurance visualization: We can mentally rehearse enduring fatigue and pain in competition, visualizing ourselves maintaining focus, form, and control despite discomfort.
- b) Imagery of strength and persistence: We can use imagery exercises that emphasize resilience, such as picturing yourself overcoming obstacles.
- c) Challenge acceptance visualization: We can visualize the "challenging" parts of a competition (e.g., final lap, final match), imagining ourselves responding to the challenge with strength and persistence.

3. Controlled exposure and pain tolerance training: The goal is to gradually expose ourselves to controlled discomfort to build pain tolerance and mental resilience over time.

Here are three techniques we can use:

- a) Pain threshold training: Integrate drills that push physical limits within safe, controlled environments. For example, high-intensity interval training (HIIT) can provide repeated exposure to high levels of exertion, helping us adapt to intense physical stress.
- b) Heat and cold adaptation: Controlled exposure to extreme temperatures—such as in saunas, ice baths, or contrasting heat-cold showers—can raise our pain tolerance. This technique can help us become more comfortable with discomfort and builds mental resilience to adverse conditions.
- c) Progressive training loads: Gradually increase training loads in the pre-competition period to expose ourselves to higher intensities and longer durations. Progressively introducing these stimuli allows us to adapt incrementally and reduces the mental shock of sudden exertion increases.

4. Mindfulness-based pain management: The objective is to use mindfulness techniques to help us observe pain and fatigue without attaching negative judgments, creating a neutral experience of discomfort.

Probably you are already getting used to these techniques from the previous chapters. Nevertheless, the following three techniques are designed specifically to improve our tolerance to fatigue and pain:

- a) Mindful breathing: Focusing on deep, controlled breathing during moments of physical stress, can reduce perceived pain intensity by engaging the parasympathetic nervous system and providing a point of focus.
- b) Body scanning with acceptance: Perform body scans that bring awareness to areas of discomfort without attempting to alter or resist the sensation. Observing fatigue as a passing experience can reduce the psychological aversion to pain.
- c) Detached observation: Learn to mentally “step back” from discomfort, observing pain as a detached experience rather than letting it dominate your focus. We can silently label sensations (“burning,” “tightness”) without attaching emotional significance.

Last but not least...

5. Self-talk for pain tolerance and motivation: the aim is to use positive and motivating self-talk to reinforce resilience and maintain focus through moments of fatigue and pain.

Here are three techniques we can use:

- a) Mantras of strength: Develop simple, affirmative statements we can repeat during challenging moments, such as “Stay strong,” “I’ve got this,” or “One more rep.” Repetitive phrases build resilience and reduce the perception of pain.
- b) Task-oriented self-talk: Focus on specific actions related to our technique (e.g., “Keep my posture, relax my shoulders, etc.”) rather than on discomfort. This distracts from pain and keeps the mind occupied with a productive task.
- c) Incremental motivation: Use self-talk to break down endurance tasks into smaller, manageable segments. Phrases like “Just focus on this lap” or “Take it one breath at a time” will help us focus on manageable goals instead of the entire challenge.

Now it’s time to put all this into action.

LET'S PRACTICE!

A well-rounded pre-competition routine should incorporate these strategies to help us build resilience to fatigue and pain in a structured way:

1. Visualization: Begin with an imagery session where we visualize ourselves handling discomfort effectively, reinforcing confidence in our ability to tolerate fatigue and pain.

2. Controlled exposure training: Quite possibly you already integrate high-intensity intervals to your training. However, you can introduce tolerance enhancing drills or heat or cold adaptation sessions to expose ourselves to manageable, controlled levels of physical stress.

3. Self-talk practice: Use a self-talk strategy or mantra that we can rely on in moments of intense discomfort, helping us to stay motivated and focused on the process.

4. Mindfulness: To conclude, during cooling-down or stretching, practice mindfulness and body scanning to build acceptance and neutral observation of any residual fatigue.

The next chapter is about one of my favorite strategies and soon you will find out why.