

An Athlete's Secret Weapon – Visualization

By Susan Farber, MFT/Sports Psychotherapist

What can an athlete do to gain the upper hand over his or her opponent who has the same fitness level, nutrition regime, and game experience? This is where sports psychology comes into play. An athlete can rise to the next level and surpass their opponents with the use of mental preparation. Visualization, also known as guided imagery, enables an athlete to create clear detailed images in their mind that they want to manifest as reality during their game. Using imagery, an athlete can put themselves in every situation possible and practice responding successfully. The outcome is reduced anxiety and mental involvement before ever stepping onto the playing field.

The following article was written by two women new to competitive cycling who race for Echelon, Santa Barbara. They sought assistance in mentally preparing for the Mothball's criterium, a fast paced race determined by a total time and number of laps. Criteriums require a mix of good technical skills and concentration.

Members and friends of Echelon who were present at the November meeting were treated to a presentation by Susan Farber, MA, MFT on the techniques of guided imagery and benefits of visualization for cyclists. More recently, Susan, a sponsor of our club, offered her services to some of Echelon's women new to racing in order to help them prepare for the Mothballs Crit. Here are two personal experiences:

I admit...I was freaked out about my first crit...MOTHBALLS!!! Yes, we all know, Mothballs is cool--a popular early season non-technical race featuring great new pavement. But I was still scared. I thought I could cope by calling it "excited" instead of nervous, but it didn't work. I was having trouble sleeping, and I was more uneasy as the race day approached. When Susan Farber offered first time Echelon women crit racers a free visualization session, I signed up--I needed all the help I could get! Then I worried about seeing Susan. Would it be weird seeing a teammate in her office instead of on the A ride or at Rusty's? Would someone I know see me going to her office and think I needed help? Wouldn't I rather just go home after the A ride and worry more by myself?

Well, it turned out to be quite a positive experience. Susan's office has off-street parking and is in one of a group of charming bungalows tucked away in a private location downtown. Her office is like a little living room, and I felt comfortable right away. Annie went too, and Susan asked us what was on our minds about our first crit. When I talked it over with her, I was surprised when she re-phrased my concerns in a way that helped me understand what I was saying about my doubts and concerns regarding my ability to race. I began to realize that I could look at my first crit in an entirely different way. What an enormous relief! It was a big help to be

talking things over with a fellow cyclist who knows what racing is like. Susan gave us a visualization exercise to mentally practice for race day.

It's the kind of thing I'll always be able to use to prepare for a stressful situation, focusing on breathing, getting really relaxed wherever I am, and visualizing the situation I am preparing for from a calm perspective. Annie made a digital recording of the visualization session, and it's now on my iPod at my beck and call! It's great to know that we have our very own psychologist with an inside knowledge of sports and competition. Yes, Susan Farber was my Secret Weapon in the Mothballs race!

— *Carol*

There is an enormous amount of work and preparation required to stage an event like Mothballs and in the weeks leading up to the crit, I was busy juggling family, job, Mothballs prep, and training on the bike. I had little time to think about getting prepared mentally beyond taking a few deep breaths when the thought of crit racing would bring on butterflies in my stomach. Thank goodness Susan offered her services to us. She recommended recording the session so that Carol and I could listen to the recording twice daily before the race. During our session, Susan was able to personalize the visualization by taking into account our fears and expectations. She also reinforced the importance of using a narrow and a wide focus during the race.

In the hectic days leading up to the race, it was actually a relief to sit down, pop in the iPod earphones, and spend about 10 minutes listening to the recording. It was basically a dynamic rehearsal for the race that engaged all five senses with positive imagery. I noticed how relaxed my body felt afterwards and how the visualization reduced my anxiety about the race. It was like having an internal comfort zone. By the time race day arrived, I was ready to line up at the start line and breathe deeply, because that is what I had rehearsed. After the first few laps, positive phrases from the session ran through my thoughts. One phrase, "I deserve to be at the front," propelled my bike right to the very front. And even though I was in the lead briefly and my calves were cramping towards the end of the race, I stayed with the group. There were even a few moments when time seemed to stand still and I felt great, absorbed in the bright colors of the uniforms and the sounds of the spinning gears.

— *Anne*

Susan Farber is a competitive cyclist and Sports Psychotherapist who specializes in mental coaching for athletes of all ages and levels. She is available for personalized visualization training that is specific to an athlete's sport and can be reached at (805) 886-5538. Her website is thewinningedgesb.com for more information.