

The Race Day Mental Preparation Protocol

A Science-Backed Framework for Peak Performance Under Pressure

The Hard Truth: Your training has prepared your body. But on race day, when your lungs are burning at mile 2 and doubt creeps in, your mind determines whether you break through or break down.

The Evidence: Research in sports psychology shows that mental preparation can improve race performance by 2-5%, which translates to 12-30 seconds in a 5K—the difference between 7th place and the podium.

The Promise: This guide gives you the exact mental preparation sequence used by championship-level athletes. Follow it, and you'll toe the line with confidence, clarity, and control.

The Three Pillars of Race Day Resilience

1. CONTROLLED AROUSAL

Managing your nervous system to stay in the optimal performance zone—energized but not panicked.

2. PROCESS ORIENTATION

Shifting attention away from outcomes (place, time) toward controllable execution (splits, form, effort).

3. ADAPTIVE MINDSET

Building the mental flexibility to respond to adversity—a bad start, unexpected weather, or mid-race suffering.

"You cannot control the competition. You cannot control the weather. You can only control your preparation, your focus, and your response to discomfort."

The Race Week Mental Preparation Timeline

7 DAYS BEFORE: ESTABLISH YOUR RACE IDENTITY

Define Your Why

Write down—physically, on paper—why this race matters to you. Not why it should matter. Why it actually matters. This becomes your anchor when discomfort tempts you to quit.

Exercise: Complete this sentence in 2-3 paragraphs: "This race matters to me because..." Be specific. Be honest. Keep this with your race gear.

Study the Course

- ✓ **Walk or visualize the course.** Know where the hills are, where you can push, where you must be patient.
- ✓ **Identify landmarks.** "At the 1-mile tree, I check my breathing and relax my shoulders."
- ✓ **Plan your race into thirds.** First third: conservative and controlled. Middle third: maintain and respond. Final third: empty the tank.

Build Your Pre-Race Playlist

Music affects arousal levels. Create two playlists: one for 2 hours before (calming focus music), one for warm-up (energizing, hype music). Test them during your last hard workout.

3 DAYS BEFORE: MENTAL REHEARSAL BEGINS

Visualization Protocol (10 minutes daily)

Elite athletes don't just "think positive." They rehearse the race in vivid sensory detail. This activates the same neural pathways used during the actual race.

Script Example:

Close your eyes. Feel the starting line under your spikes. Hear the starter's commands. Your heart is racing—that's normal, that's good. The gun fires. You settle into your rhythm by 200 meters. Feel your legs turning over, smooth and controlled.

Mile 1: You're exactly where you planned. Your breathing is strong. Someone surges—you don't react. You trust your pace.

Mile 2: The pain is arriving. Your legs are heavy. This is where you've prepared for this moment. You think: "I've done this in practice. I know I can hold this." You maintain form even as discomfort rises.

Mile 3: It's time. You have permission to suffer. You lift your knees, pump your arms, and drive toward the finish. You hear nothing but your breath and your footsteps. Every stride, you're getting closer. You cross the line having left everything on the course.

Develop Your Cue Words

When suffering arrives mid-race, your brain cannot process complex thoughts. You need simple, powerful cue words:

- ✓ **"Relax"** - Drops tension in shoulders and jaw
- ✓ **"Push"** - Initiates final kick or surge
- ✓ **"Here"** - Brings attention back to the present moment
- ✓ **"Strong"** - Reinforces confidence and capability

Pick 2-3 words. Practice using them in workouts this week.

NIGHT BEFORE: OPERATIONAL PREPARATION

The Equipment Checklist

Anxiety is often caused by uncertainty. Eliminate variables by preparing everything the night before.

- Race uniform (pinned if necessary)
- Spikes with fresh spikes installed
- Pre-race shoes for warm-up
- Weather-appropriate layers
- Safety pins, hair ties, Body Glide
- Water bottle and pre-race fuel
- Your "Why" statement from Day 7
- Music playlists downloaded offline

The 3-2-1 Sleep Routine

- ✓ **3 hours before bed:** Last meal. Keep it familiar, nothing experimental.
- ✓ **2 hours before bed:** No screens. Read, stretch, or do light mobility work.
- ✓ **1 hour before bed:** Journal 3 things you're confident about going into the race.

IF YOU CAN'T SLEEP

This is normal. One night of poor sleep does not significantly impact race performance. Your body has been tapering—you have stored energy. Accept that pre-race nerves may keep you awake. Rest is still valuable. Lie down, breathe deeply, and visualize your race. Even rest without sleep aids recovery.

RACE MORNING: THE ACTIVATION SEQUENCE

90 Minutes Before Race Time

- ✓ **Eat your pre-race fuel.** This should be practiced and familiar (toast with peanut butter, banana, oatmeal—whatever works for you).
- ✓ **Hydrate strategically.** 8-12 oz of water. Not too much—you don't want to need a bathroom mid-race.
- ✓ **Begin your calming playlist.** Control your environment. Limit distractions and social interactions if they make you more nervous.

60 Minutes Before: Warm-Up Protocol

Your warm-up is not just physical—it's your transition into race mode. Follow this sequence:

- ✓ **10 minutes easy jogging.** Focus on your breathing. Notice your body waking up.
- ✓ **Dynamic drills.** High knees, butt kicks, leg swings. These activate muscle firing patterns.
- ✓ **4 x 100m strides.** Gradually increase pace from 80% to 95%. Feel your legs respond. Build confidence.
- ✓ **5 minutes rest/settle.** Change into spikes. Bathroom break. Find your team.

20 Minutes Before: The Mental Lock-In

This is where champions separate from competitors. Most athletes are now spiraling in nervous energy. You are going to be different.

The Final Visualization (3 minutes):

Close your eyes. Take three deep breaths—4 seconds in, 6 seconds out. Feel the ground under your spikes. See the starting line. You are ready. All the work is done. You have trained for this. The suffering you'll feel—you've felt it before in workouts. You know you can handle it. When it hurts, you will not quit. You will respond. You will push. You belong here. Now open your eyes. It's time to race.

10 Minutes Before: Controlled Arousal

- ✓ **Switch to your hype playlist.** Let the energy build.
- ✓ **Move continuously.** Light jogging, jumping jacks. Stay warm and loose.
- ✓ **Repeat your cue words.** Out loud if needed. "Relax. Strong. Push."
- ✓ **Shake out your arms.** Release tension from your shoulders and hands.

STARTING LINE: THE FINAL 60 SECONDS

The Pre-Gun Ritual

- ✓ **Find your spot.** Position yourself based on your realistic pace, not your ego.
- ✓ **Breathe in rhythm.** 4 counts in through the nose, 6 counts out through the mouth. This activates your parasympathetic nervous system and counteracts panic.
- ✓ **Focus on one process cue.** "Fast start, then settle." or "Hold back the first 400m." Give your brain a job.
- ✓ **Acceptance statement.** "This will hurt. I will not quit."

THE GUN FIRES. NOW WHAT?

Execute the plan. Not the perfect plan—your plan. The early adrenaline will make your pace feel easy. It's not. Trust your watch and your body. The race is not won in the first 400 meters. It's not lost either. Settle into your rhythm. Everything you've prepared is about to pay off.

During the Race: Adaptive Mental Strategies

When You're Behind Goal Pace

Don't Panic. Adjust. If you're 5 seconds behind at mile 1, you haven't lost the race. You've lost 5 seconds. Can you make up 2 seconds per mile over the remaining distance? Focus on the next checkpoint, not the finish line.

When It Starts to Hurt (And It Will)

- ✓ **Reframe the pain.** Pain is not a sign you should stop—it's a sign you're pushing your limits. This is exactly where you wanted to be.
- ✓ **Count your breaths.** 1-2-3-4 inhale, 1-2-3-4-5-6 exhale. Counting gives your mind a task and regulates your nervous system.
- ✓ **Break the race into segments.** Don't think about 2 miles to go. Think about the next telephone pole, the next turn, the next 200 meters.

When Someone Passes You

Your Response Defines You. Do not let their surge break your confidence. Ask: "Can I respond?" If yes, go with them. If no, let them go and focus on your own race. There are dozens of runners behind you who would trade places with you right now. Execute your race, not theirs.

The Final 800 Meters

This is your moment. You have trained for this. Give yourself permission to suffer. Empty the tank. You can rest after the finish line. Use your cue words: "**Push. Strong. Finish.**" Drive your arms, lift your knees, focus your eyes 20 meters ahead. Find one more person to catch. Then one more. Then the finish line. Leave it all out there.

After You Cross the Line: The Reflection Protocol

Immediate Post-Race (0-10 Minutes)

- ✓ **Keep moving.** Walk for 5-10 minutes to clear lactate and prevent dizziness.
- ✓ **Hydrate and refuel.** Your body needs recovery to start immediately.
- ✓ **Process emotions—don't suppress them.** Disappointment, joy, frustration, pride—all are valid.

The Same-Day Debrief (Within 4 Hours)

Before the memory fades, write down answers to these questions:

- What went exactly as planned?
- What surprised me during the race?
- When did I feel strongest mentally?
- When did doubt creep in, and how did I respond?
- If I could race it again tomorrow, what would I change?
- What am I proud of, regardless of the result?

"Every race—good or bad—is data. Champions use that data to get better. Losers make excuses or ignore the lessons."

The 48-Hour Rule

If you're disappointed with your result, give yourself 48 hours to feel it. Then move on. Dwelling longer than that doesn't help you improve—it only breeds resentment and doubt. Extract the lesson. Adjust the training. Get back to work.

Final Thoughts: Building Resilience Over Time

Mental toughness is not something you're born with. It's something you build through repeated exposure to discomfort, through learning to stay present under pressure, through choosing the hard path when quitting is easier.

This guide gives you the structure. But you have to do the work. Visualize the race. Practice the breathing. Use the cue words. Follow the routine. Over time, these become automatic. You'll toe the line knowing that no matter what happens—bad weather, a missed PR, unexpected competition—you have the tools to handle it.

That's resilience.

That's the difference between good runners and great ones.

Now get to work.

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