

Mental Preparation for the Marmotte

“Endurance is the struggle to continue against a mounting desire to stop” – Samuele Marcora

This definition of endurance is perfectly aligned to how I feel as I climb Alpe d’Huez at the end of the Marmotte. As I struggle up the steep section to La Garde, I’ve been cycling for seven hours, I’ve ridden 160km and climbed about 4,000m, and my body is telling me it’s time to stop. Unfortunately, the finish line is 1,000m higher up, the sun is beating down, it is 30°C in the shade and it’s going to take me at least another hour and a quarter of unrelenting toil. Everywhere, I see inviting places to stop, take off my shoes (my feet are killing me) and just lie down and relax. There are little streams gushing cool fountains of water, soft green grass and shady trees. Who cares when I finish, or even if I finish at all? What does it matter? Why am I doing this, anyway?

I keep going because I tell myself I’m not a quitter. I didn’t do all this preparation to stop by the side of the road. My goal is to finish in a decent time so I’m determined to do it. I tell myself to pedal smoothly, to relax my upper body, to breathe deeply. I focus on the next corner: just get there, and then we will see... I pull up more with my feet to relieve the pain. I remind myself to drink, then I try to distract myself from the pain in my feet and all the signals telling me to stop. I let my mind go blank, repeating meaningless phrases tunelessly to myself. Another rider passes me, just slightly faster: I line up behind and follow, hypnotised by his rear wheel hub. Time passes and the familiar landmarks tick by. I only focus on the next corner, ignoring the impossibly distant finish line. Focus on the process, pedal easy, relax those shoulders, stand up every now and again, take a drink, here’s another bend. Mind goes blank again.

And so the time passes, like in a dream, and at a certain point the road levels out, I cross the km 0 marker where there’s a sparse crowd in front of the cafés at the entrance to Alpe d’Huez, I turn left through the tunnel and I know I’m almost there. Amazingly, I can pick up the pace. I can’t exactly sprint, but the slight descent helps me to finish fast before collapsing over the line.

Truly, to finish the Marmotte is as much a mental challenge as a physical one!

TRAIN YOUR BRAIN TO CYCLE FASTER OR FURTHER

If it is true the Marmotte is as much a mental challenge as a physical one (the research confirms that it is) we should be finding ways to train our minds as well as our bodies.

To a certain extent, you are already doing this: in fact, any physical training you do will inevitably include some level of mental training. For example, every hard interval session is also training you to tolerate a certain level of pain. Indeed, research has shown that athletes’ ability to tolerate pain actually increases the more high-intensity interval training they do, and vice-versa.

To obtain a real performance boost, however, the next step is to deliberately include certain specific mental strategies in your training. Try out and practice the following techniques in training to find out what works for you.

SEVEN MENTAL STRATEGIES FOR ENDURANCE PERFORMANCE.

For more detail, click [here for a “how-to” guide to mental strategies.](#)

1. CLEAR GOALS

The first – and most important – is to answer the question “**why am I doing this?**” and set yourself some **clear goals**. The answers are highly individual and you must find them for yourself. Think of goals related to how you will ride (pacing, nutrition, hydration...) and not just to the end result. The former are under your control, whereas your ranking is not.

2. POSITIVE SELF-TALK

Next, train yourself in **positive self-talk**. This is no more and no less than taking control of your internal dialogue and keeping it positive and constructive. Say things like “*you are doing great, keep it coming...*” Remind yourself **why** you are doing this and how lucky you are to have the opportunity. Remind yourself too **what** you should be doing: stick to your own pace, pedal smoothly and economically, relax your shoulders, take a drink, ...

3. VISUALISATION

Use **visualisation** in the period building up to the Marmotte to see yourself riding it. Your mind (and not just your body) needs to get used to the many hours of hard effort, so it is not enough to see yourself finishing. Try to visualise the whole course from start to finish and feel the sensations in your body as you ride it. A full visualisation will take some time (at least several minutes). Use Google Street View if you don’t know the roads; better still plan a reconnaissance trip!

4. EMBRACE THE PAIN

During a hard effort, the time will inevitably come when your body tells you to slow down. You can train yourself to ignore these signals (for a while). Long climbs at threshold and high-intensity intervals help to accustom both mind and body to sustained, high levels of effort. **Embrace the pain**, welcome the discomfort, enjoy your mind’s mastery over your body... Don’t even think of it as pain, but as something positive: smile at it, feel the warm burn spreading through your muscles, feel the power in your legs and the bike driving forward...

5. DISTRACT YOURSELF

The Marmotte, though, is likely to push you further than you’ve been before, to a place where embracing the pain might no longer be helpful. The next strategy to try is **distraction**: block out the sense of effort by thinking about something else, anything that will occupy your mind. Recite a mantra, sing a song, hold an imaginary conversation, **visualise** yourself somewhere else or simply let your mind go blank in a form of **mindfulness meditation**.

6. FOCUS YOUR ATTENTION

Distraction works well but carries the risk of losing focus and dropping off the pace. Alternatively, **focus very sharply** on the rear-wheel hub of the rider just in front, on your breathing, or on some aspect of your technique (“light feet, heavy seat” to ensure a rounder, more fluid pedal stroke, for example). If you are on a turbo trainer, **listening to music** can help crowd out the pain while still allowing you to focus on technique.

7. PLAN FOR THE WORST

Another useful strategy in mental preparation is **contingency planning**. If you think through in advance everything that might go wrong and have a plan to deal with it, if the worst comes to the worst you'll be ready for it. Some of the risks to think about might include:

- Punctures
- Bad weather
- Heat
- Getting dropped
- Bonking
- Feeling sick
- Suffering from cramps
- Feeling dispirited or negative

INTERESTED IN GOING FURTHER?

[*Mental strategies and tools for endurance cycling*](#)

[*Book review: Endure, by Alex Hutchinson*](#)

[*Riding through the pain barrier*](#)

[*Training Guidelines for the Marmotte Alps*](#)

[*View from the saddle: the Marmotte Alps*](#)

HOW ALPINE COLS CAN HELP YOU

All of our coaches have ridden the Marmotte multiple times and know the challenge extremely well. We can help you prepare in two complementary ways:

1. Sign up for a six-month [*coaching agreement*](#) to receive individual day-to-day coaching and one-on-one advice;
2. Join a one-week [*coaching camp*](#) to benefit from a big block of training as well as one-on-one coaching on your technical skills and of course plenty of advice and tips for your preparation and the event itself.