

The Five Stages of the Daily Athletic Process

Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end; then stop.

LEWIS CARROLL

Each workout needs to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. I have isolated five key stages to the athletic process: **anticipation, preparation, action, perspiration, and completion.**

Set clear-cut goals and finish what you start. Get in the habit of deciding before you start every workout exactly what the workout is going to entail. Before you begin, play the workout forward in your mind. Extract a few specific vignettes from the process. We will elaborate on this more in chapter 10. These five stages are one of those very simple ideas that took me decades to isolate.

You will use different mental skills and psychological angling to cope with each stage. I will expand on these stages later in the book. For now, as you read these stages, play them out in your mind as you would in your day-to-day life.

FIVE STAGES TO THE ATHLETE'S WAY DAILY WORKOUT PROCESS

1. **ANTICIPATION:** *Come up with a game plan. Visualize it. Play it forward.*
2. **PREPARATION:** *Pack the gym bag, get to the gym, lace up sneakers.*
3. **ACTION:** *Go! This is the actual moment you clear your watch and push "start."*
4. **PERSPIRATION:** *This is the workout itself. Create flow. Lose yourself. Sweat!*
5. **COMPLETION:** *The finish line. You did it. Sense of achievement and reward.*

THE ANATOMY OF ATHLETIC BLISS

It's good to be just plain happy; it's a little better to know that you're happy; but to understand that you're happy and to know why and

how . . . and still be happy, in the being and the knowing, well that is beyond happiness, that is bliss.

HENRY MILLER

The pursuit of happiness is the prime motivating force in most people's lives. Athletes like to exercise because it makes them happy. If you are someone who thinks of exercise as a suffer-fest, a disagreeable, unpleasant experience to be avoided, the key is going to be for you to flip your perspective to associate physical activity with happiness. This is easier than it sounds. You will learn how to do that systematically in the pages that follow. Athletes consider working out to be rewarding and pleasurable, because they intuitively incorporate the four tenets of athletic bliss into every workout.

THE FOUR TENETS OF ATHLETIC BLISS

- *Presence of positive emotions*
- *Physical pleasure*
- *Meaning/significance*
- *Sense of achievement*

If you can make even one of these a part of your exercise experience, you will be on your way to enjoying working out.

The goal of every workout from beginning, to middle, to end is for you to figure out how to associate exercise with pleasurable experience on an intellectual and a gut level. All animals seek pleasure and avoid pain. This is called "The Law of Effect" or "The Pleasure Principle." The problem with the "no pain, no gain" motto is that it goes against the Pleasure Principle and sets up an instinctive aversion response to exercise. I say "no brain, no gain." Shift your perspective to see the absolute pleasure of breaking a sweat. Recondition yourself to seek exercise by realizing it feels good.

As you will learn later, you have a thinking brain that is going to come up with the positive psychological perspective and a nonthinking brain that is going to be reprogrammed to like exercise. The key is to figure out psychologically and behaviorally how to perceive every stage of the athletic process as being an agreeable experience. Bottom-up messages get sent from your animal brain as gut responses. You send top-down messages consciously. The goal is to have them match up. In order to do that, you need to start working out so that you can begin to take inventory on your mind-set,

attitude, and behavior surrounding your exercise. By incorporating the four tenets, you will have a perfect match between the intuitive response and the mental skills you need to make exercise enjoyable.

In short, the presence of positive emotion results from a decision to have an optimistic, hopeful, and curious outlook. The physical pleasure comes from finding the flow channel, losing yourself, and being totally engaged, knowing that anandamide, dopamine, and endorphins are released as analgesics. Meaning/significance is very individual, and most creative. It could be anything from hearing your favorite song on shuffle mode at an ideal moment and noticing a perfect middle-C note or seventeenth chord, seeing your muse entering the pool deck and then swimming side by side, stroke for stroke with you, feeling a part of a sports community, the way the light is hitting the side of a skyscraper, having some time alone, smelling a tropical plumeria tree on a familiar road, sniffing wood burning outside on the route home, sensing gratitude for being healthy enough to move. These are mine. Last, the sense of achievement comes from accomplishing a goal and being able to say, "I did it," the hit of dopamine, and the boost of self-esteem and confidence.

PRESENCE OF POSITIVE EMOTIONS

I am still determined to be cheerful and happy, in whatever situation I may be; for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances.

MARTHA WASHINGTON (AMERICAN FIRST LADY)

Athletic performance requires a state of optimism to create peak physical output. To keep going when part of you really wants to give up or quit, athletes learn to create a resilient, positive outlook. An optimistic disposition gives athletes the most potent mental and physical energy needed to move. This daily practice required to get from point A to point B in a workout also reshapes your synaptic connections to the athletic mind-set. The daily practice of learning how to look on the bright side originates in your up brain in your frontal lobes and is sent to your emotional down brain via up-down processing.

Research has found that serotonin and other neurotransmitters released during exercise build more of this area and allows for more upbeat cross-