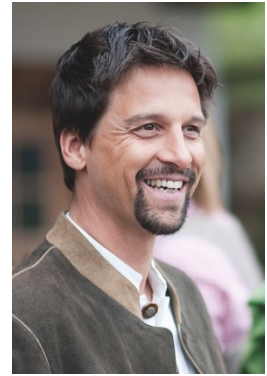


## Sport psychological aspects in ski mountaineering

Interview with Mentalcoach Mag. Dr. Patrick Bernatzky  
(Maximilian Kurz MSc)



As everyone who has ever taken part in the Hervis Mountain Attack or a similarly strenuous competition knows, physical performance including strength and endurance is very important, but by far not everything! The rigors of the race become increasingly greater as the race progresses, especially as night falls, as well as potentially difficult weather conditions. The tougher it gets the more mental strength comes into focus. We talked to sports mentalcoach Dr. Patrick Bernatzky and got some valuable tips.

- ***Patrick, preparing for a competition requires iron discipline. Training starts months before the race. How do I manage to overcome mental lows in preparation and still motivate myself to train?***

If you want to achieve extraordinary performances, you have to take extraordinary paths to do so. Overcoming one's own comfort zone is the daily bread of competitive athletes. Everyone knows that no masters fall from the sky and that with daily discipline you develop further and thus come closer to your set goals step by step. Mental lows can also be described as challenges that challenge you again and again to adjust your focus. Goals and visions serve as motivation and provide orientation. When your thoughts drift off again and the couch calls, it is certainly beneficial to imagine how it will be when you just reach your goal. Suppose your future-self calls you and asks, "Where are you? What are you waiting for?"

An exciting question could also be phrased as follows: If my inner champion were to act or react right now, how would I know, what would I do? So you should first adjust your mindset intelligently before you get into action. Unfortunately, this is not enough only once in the preparation, but also this must be trained. I have to constantly tune myself mentally and pick up where I want to go.

- ***Now the preparation is finished, the evening before the race has come. I am very restless and begin to doubt myself and my abilities. My resting heart rate and breathing rate are noticeably elevated. I am nervous and very tense. What are some ways to calm down, regulate myself, and still stay focused?***

In competition, emotional constellations arise that are difficult to imitate in training. That's also what's special about a competition. You get to know sides of yourself that are otherwise not so noticeable. If I react with an increase in heart rate or breathing rate, that's not always a sign of increasing nervousness. The body is adjusting to the upcoming challenge. That is a good thing. The night before, it is often helpful to become aware of your strengths. Also that you have collected many pieces of the puzzle in training over the past weeks and months, which now come together on the coming day to form a target picture. "I am now close to reaching my goal. I worked hard for it myself and earned it, now I get to show what I'm made of tomorrow! In the right place at the right time!" It's not just about competitive strength, it's about competitive joy!

- ***Race day has arrived. It won't be long now before the starting signal is given. I want to achieve the optimum level of activation. How can I do that and what are the dangers of over- and under-activation?***

We all react very differently in stressful situations. Competition is a stressful situation that we learn to deal with through experience. Some react with overactivation, pushing themselves too much and wanting to give 120%, and others become passive and find excuses why it can't work today. It's good to get into a mind-game and try to recognize which thoughts have which effect. But it's not about excluding thoughts or beating myself up because I'm not allowed to think about certain things. Rather, it is about recognizing hindering thoughts and then focusing on beneficial thoughts. We have a kind of inner focus flashlight - where we *direct it*, we perceive something. But the flashlight is in our own hands,

and so I can shine it on thoughts that help me direct the focus appropriately. Sometimes higher-level, calming thoughts help, such as “You know what you can do, It’s all good, Stay with yourself, There’s strength in calm, Trust your strengths, You know when things get tough, you’ll get really good.” And sometimes thoughts help, with which I go through my strategy or also technical procedures in detail again or even visualize. It’s best to fall back on routines that have proven themselves and then give you a certain orientation and security.

- ***Taking part at in the Hervis Mountain Attack is an enormous physical strain. The longer and harder the competition becomes, the more important the mental component becomes. How do I manage to maintain focus even when I am very tired and threatened with exhaustion?***

I always think of the slackline as a metaphor for this. When you balance across a slackline (taut rope), you are confronted with your thoughts. The goal, of course, is to maintain focus and stay balanced. If one gets into a “wobble”, I can get angry about it on the one hand and hope I don’t fall, or on the other hand I can realign and refocus. It’s similar during a competition. I get distraction offers from my body (“My muscles are getting heavy and shutting down...I can’t do this much longer.”) and through my thoughts (“...now comes the hardest part then...hopefully that one won’t catch up with me too...”). Whether or not I then accept these distractions and become unbalanced and lose my focus is up to me. Again, this is about using our inner focus flashlight to shine on or bring out those thoughts that are connected to my inner champion and rekindle my fire. Fears of failure are basically understandable and realistic. However, when I influence them with thoughts with the vision of something to replace them, I spark confidence and can visualize images of reaching my goal and see myself already at the summit or finish line. These inner images have a positive effect and so I realign myself on my symbolic competition slackline.

- ***The race is done! I am at the finish and despite ups and downs in the race I am satisfied with my performance. How should I reflect and process my performance in the race and take the optimum and positivity with me for the future?***

Every competition leaves traces that leave their mark. It is not only the result that counts, but also the way it was achieved. What did I learn? What mental highs and lows did I experience and most importantly, how did I react to them. To stay in the symbolism of the slackline: How often did I “wobble”? What caused me to wobble? What thoughts went along with it and how long did it take until I had myself under control again. What did I use to regain my balance, my focus? So what strategies do I already have at my disposal. What have I done right? What can I be proud of? What would I do the same or differently now with this experience if I were at the starting line again? A timely analysis with the mentioned questions as orientation is certainly very beneficial. In the end, we are never in true equilibrium, but we learn to deal with uncertainty better and better and to play with it. *We become more and more confident with the uncertainty.* Every competition has new challenges of its own and it can be exciting to approach them with curiosity and confidence in one’s own abilities. *What opportunity is there for me today?*