

## Seven Steps to Peak Performance

Practical tips from professional coaches, psychologists and gold medalists  
by Margaret Winchell Miller

How do you achieve peak performance? If your sport is golf or tennis, you can work on your game for hours at the driving range or on the court. But skydiving presents a unique challenge. We practice and perfect our skills one minute at a time. If you're at the DZ all day, maybe you get in six minutes of freefall time.

According to John DeRosalia, sports psychologist and peak performance coach to professional skydiving teams and individual competitors throughout the world, the limited time you have in the air makes the time on the creepers—and the time you spend visualizing the skydive in your mind, both on and off the drop zone—even more valuable. What's the best way to do this? Experts offer this advice:

### **1. Make a commitment to mental training.**

Peak performance means that you focus all of your attention on the task at hand. To do this, you need to mentally suit up. According to DeRosalia, mental training is the important work that goes on inside. "People are often uncomfortable with mental training because they're unfamiliar with doing it on a conscious level," he explains. "We tend to shy away from things we don't have much experience with or things we don't know how to do well. The risk in not training mentally is that you might continue practicing and reinforcing bad habits instead of learning better ones."

U.S. Canopy Formation Team member Sharon Shumway has competed for more than a decade and has found mental training to be a critical component of peak performance. "All skydives have mental and physical aspects," she says. "To ignore that is to miss out on half the training possibilities. Plus, it's something that you can work on off the DZ. For years, our team only practiced mental training individually, sharing books and ideas, but not working as a team. Learning techniques for team visualizations helped the team feel more in sync and increased our commitment to individual training."

DeRosalia points out that the Olympic Villages are filled with sports psychologists and peak performance coaches assisting winners. "If mental training isn't part of your skydiving experience," he says, "it's only because you haven't tried it—or you don't believe it has value. And if you don't believe it has value, it's because you haven't studied it enough."

### **2. Master the skills of visualization and mental imagery.**

If you want to learn a new skill or routine, you first want to just visualize it, DeRosalia says. You don't want to complicate the experience by adding any other sensory impressions, such as touch, smell or hearing.

"When a coach watches a formation team work on creepers, he makes visual adjustments that help the team accomplish the goal," he says. "You can do the same thing. For

instance, if you're working on a transition in a formation dive, you might close your eyes and see yourself doing the movement from above or from below. Imagine it from the perspective of the person watching you. You might notice that your legs aren't in the right position, and you might want to make an adjustment. You can spend five or ten minutes every once in a while picturing yourself. Visualization is a skill that imprints, so it's most useful when you're learning something new."

Once you've learned a skill, he recommends using mental imagery to help you really implant it. Unlike simply picturing a maneuver, imagery allows you to fully engage in the experience. The concept of mental imagery may seem foreign, but we practice it all the time.

"Whenever you go to a movie, you're ordering your conscious mind to take a walk, and you allow your unconscious mind to take over," says DeRosalia. "Your whole physiology can change just by looking at a picture. Imagery puts that to work for you. The advantage of this exercise is that you can close your eyes and imagine a perfect skydive, and it's actually as if you're experiencing it."

If you really want to enhance your skydiving performance, DeRosalia advises making sure you turn up the sound. Hear the aircraft as it soars away. Add the sound of your exit count. Add what it's like to feel somebody's grip and the sensation of the brisk wind rushing across your face. Feel every emotion of the sport as you imagine it. You'll discover that your next skydive is infinitely better.

### **3. Pace yourself.**

Because the learning curve in skydiving is so narrow, it's easy to become frustrated when maneuvers and procedures take longer to learn than you expect. But Mike Turoff, co-author of *The Skydiver's Handbook*, stresses the importance of patience in training and performance. "Remember that skydiving is done in intervals," he says. "You have very little time to gain experience during each jump. There are certain things you're not going to accomplish each time. Small steps, small increments, small successes lead to the big success. We all have goals. But don't push yourself so hard that you miss the big picture. There are people with hundreds of jumps who don't know as much as a person with 15 great jumps and vice-versa. Everyone learns at a different rate. Whether it takes you ten jumps or 100 jumps doesn't matter as long as you enjoy the journey."

As an instructor, Turoff says that his toughest assignment is understanding how a student learns and tailoring a program to that student. "Observing how a person works and seeing how others work with him helps me do that," he says. "Some people will repeatedly have problems at certain stages. Many times, in order to increase learning, it's necessary to do something different. That's why it's helpful to involve different jumpmasters. I'll grab a colleague and say, 'Hey, I'm not getting through to this person. I want you to take a look and see what you think. Why don't you jump with him instead of me?' "

An instructor-examiner with 3,200 jumps, Turoff points out that no one is 100-percent perfect all the time. “There are times I’m on a jump when I do my job fantastically, but there are other times I feel I don’t deserve the rating I have.”

The key to peak performance, Turoff says, is to never give up. “Take a look at what you’ve already done and what you want to do, then find a way to educate yourself to get from point A to point B. Find a supportive instructor. Stand up for your own rights. Find a way to meet the challenge.”

#### **4. Learn to identify and avoid negativity.**

A two-time gold-medal winner at the U.S. style and accuracy nationals, Greg Windmiller finds that negativity is the toughest emotion he wrestles. Windmiller recently returned from Florida, where he assisted the U.S. Army Parachute Team 82nd Airborne division demonstration team in an exhibition jump at the Miami Dolphins stadium. DeRosalia worked with Windmiller and the Army’s style and accuracy team during an intensive training period in Marana, Arizona.

“Negativity is by far the easiest bandwagon to get on,” says Windmiller. “Once you’re faced with negative thoughts, it’s important to have the discipline to stop and shift your focus. Dr. John stressed the importance of surrounding yourself with positive people. He brought our team together and identified habits and behaviors that could potentially impair the team’s performance. Then he helped us recognize those times when we started leaning toward negativity, so we could recognize and arrest it at an early stage.”

#### **5. Practice mental training outside the DZ.**

DeRosalia says that you can easily perform visualization and imagery exercises and practice them wherever you are. “You’re stuck in traffic or you’re in the line at the supermarket, and you’re irritated because the person in front of you has 25 coupons. You have a choice about what you want to do with that time and irritation while you wait—just as you have a choice when you’re in an airplane waiting to jump and you find out you have to go around again because there are clouds. If you’ve practiced getting centered and calm in the checkout line, when you could be anxious and nervous, then when you’re up in the plane, the ability to focus is right there, because you’ve done it a thousand times.”

Pete Allum, a member of the British national 4-way team Sebastian XL, credits DeRosalia with much of his team’s success at the World Air Games last year in Spain. “John required us to commit to doing a specific amount of mental training outside of our skydiving training,” says Allum. “This took the form of relaxation and visualization, something we’d always done, but we were now committing to do it away from the practice site. John also spent some time with discussing our belief systems and motivations, then helping us shape a plan for our team. This was critical, I feel, as we ultimately need to fuel our own fires. At the World Air Games in Spain, we left the meet with a feeling that we had performed close to 100 percent.”

## **6. Beware of overload.**

“The people who engage in extreme sports such as skydiving are wired differently than your average person,” according to Dennis Sprague, Ph.D., sports psychologist and consultant to professional athletes. “Generally, they’re high risk-takers and enjoy the thrill of the challenge itself, which gives them a different mindset to begin with. Sports psychologists work with this type of athlete differently than, say, a professional golfer.

“The motivation issue, which can be a problem with many athletes, usually isn’t a factor with high risk-takers, so the challenge is on using their high energy and risk-taking behavior to their advantage. To do this, you have to make sure that they’re not so fired up with adrenaline that they don’t take care of details regarding equipment, skill and safety,” says Sprague. “There’s a fine line between an ideal performance state and going beyond that point in an almost manic-like state, which can create deadly mistakes. Breathing exercises, relaxation training and visualization are all relevant techniques to keep these risk-takers on a more even keel.”

Sprague explains that during stressful events, hormones called catecholamines release into the body and affect an individual’s emotional responses. “Studies have shown that simple mistakes have been made in the day-to-day activities of NFL football players, Russian paratroopers and airline pilots due to catecholamine overload, which is similar to an adrenaline rush,” he says. “The more intense the stress, the more intense the overload. So, while a pro golfer going into the final round of a major championship tied with Tiger Woods would experience this phenomenon to a degree, it wouldn’t be as regular an occurrence as with an extreme athlete. Therein lies, for the extreme athlete, a special need for attention to detail and what some might even call overpreparation.”

Extreme sports require exceptional decision-making skills. Eat well to ensure mental clarity, and don’t jump if you’re preoccupied or distracted. There’s always tomorrow.

## **7. Forget about the competition.**

For Jack Jefferies, who has three world championship and five world cup gold medals in formation skydiving as a member of Airspeed Arizona, it all comes down to focus. People who want to improve their skills and achieve their peak levels should focus on performance, he says, rather than outcome.

“What matters is performing your own personal best, not outdoing the other guy,” says Jefferies. “A tight and sharp focus on the moment of play is essential to performing well. Keeping 100 percent of your attention on the task at hand requires great distraction control. In training Airspeed, we’ve found two common distractions that can take our minds off the skydive. The first is being overly concerned with results, and the second is being concerned at all with our competition. Airspeed’s success has come with diligent mental training, leading to a purity of moment-to-moment focus on our own game.”

Windmiller agrees. “Style and accuracy is one of the few disciplines in our sport that is primarily an individual competition. In my experience, one constant remains true. When I have a bad jump—or even a good jump that could have been better—99 percent of the

time, it leads back to one thing: lack of focus. While experience and ability are essential in all forms of competition, I believe that concentration and focus are the most important ingredients in winning. Without complete and total focus, an individual's ability is secondary, and winning becomes more luck than anything else."

Turoff points out that peak performance shouldn't necessarily be everyone's goal. In the end, he says, everyone's goal should be to have fun and to be safe. Everything else, he says, is icing on the cake.

DeRosalia, a self-professed perfectionist, offers this final thought to anyone who finds that his freefall time isn't as satisfying, rewarding or enjoyable as it used to be:

"There was one skydive I'd really destroyed. I don't remember exactly what went wrong, but I landed and was walking off the landing area with one of those looks, carrying my parachute, thoroughly disgusted with myself. A friend saw me and asked what was wrong. 'I screwed up,' I said, and I started telling him what a mess I'd made and that I blew the skydive for the people I was jumping with. He looked at me and said, 'John, we're jumping out of airplanes! Lighten up! This is fun!' Then I started to laugh. It all came back."