

# WINNING THE MENTAL GAME

Bernard Eckey explains how you can keep one step ahead

**M**AKE sure you stay on top of the mental game, said the coach to a novice competition pilot at the beginning of his first regional championship. "Did I hear that right?" you might say, "sport psychology might be the key to success for our much celebrated top athletes, but does it really apply to gliding?" Well, I have news for you! If you think that the mental game is only important in other sports, or if you think that it only applies to top level

competition flying, think again!

Flying gliders requires only minimal physical strength, but few other sports demand such lengthy and uninterrupted mental effort. Regardless of whether we are flying cross-country for fun or we are competing in a top-level championship we always need to be one step ahead mentally. Sport psychology is just as important as practical skills – especially in difficult or stressful situations. Therefore we will now

learn how to master our thought processes, emotions and feelings!

Glider pilots never plan to fail, but it is a well-known fact that some of them fail to plan. If it is true that the difference between a dream and a goal is a plan then we need to consider some form of planning for an individual pilot and assist with the development of a tailor-made plan. In other words, first plan your work and then work your plan. Success is by far more likely if planned and individualised training programmes replace haphazard and ad-hoc coaching sessions.

Our seasonal sport combined with the uncertainties of gliding weather and the infrequent availability of gliding coaches require very careful medium- to long-term planning.

Let's consider the case of an ambitious early solo pilot who is exhibiting some weakness (or problems) with soaring. The coach should put together a training plan aimed at further improving the pilot's skill and theoretical knowledge. Developed in close co-operation with the student, the plan must revolve around the various constraints of both student and coach. It should also include suggestions for practising particular skills and a timeframe for future coaching flight(s).

Why is it necessary to go through all this trouble? Well here are some very good reasons for it:

- A plan puts a goal clearly in front of both student and coach.
- It will create a performance-enhancing environment.
- It allows the student to gauge his or her progress.
- It sets a realistic time frame for the achievements of goals.
- It fosters self-satisfaction and confidence.
- It allows an easy adaptation if unforeseen circumstances develop or a poor soaring season is encountered.

Putting the plan on paper is of prime importance and should be the very next step. But rather than placing it in a drawer it is best kept in a prominent place. There it can be reviewed on a regular, if not daily, basis where it constantly reminds the pilot of his or her goal and the preparations necessary for achieving it.

Not surprisingly, there are standard training programmes and detailed plans for performance enhancement available for almost all sports – except gliding. The three-year training plan detailed in my book is an attempt to change this.

The first step is to insert the pilot's goal for each soaring season at the bottom of the plan. Please note that it is the coached person who determines the goal and not the coach. Financial constraints, family commitments and other limitations on the available time can best be assessed by the trainee pilot and although the coach's recommendations should take a trainee's possible under- or overconfidence into account they are just that – mere recommendations.

The next step is to insert the "stepping stones" for achieving the season's goals. This is where the coach's input is most valuable. Based on the skill level of the pilot in question the coach should provide guidance not only on the timing but if possible also on the



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sequence of the various intermediate goals. After all that is done student and coach have a blueprint for the pilot's continued development with direction and focus. Now we only need to implement the tailor-made training programme, monitor it and modify it if and when changing circumstances dictate it.

**Positive thinking**

Avoiding success is simple; all we need to do is to allow ourselves to slip into a negative frame of mind. When we find ourselves in a difficult situation and decide that it is all too hard, or that the challenge ahead is far too great, we are on the fast track to failure. Fear of failure impedes the realisation of our potential. If deep down we fear defeat, we have already lost before we have even started. The misery is self-inflicted – we have succumbed to the power of negative thinking.

As with any other endeavour, a negative frame of mind must be turned into a positive one and this holds especially true if you want to have success in gliding, because a negative or defeatist attitude and poor performance go hand in hand.

But let's not dwell on negative thinking for too long – we don't want to waste time. And anyhow, all of this does not apply to you – you are the fortunate type of person with a positive mental attitude. If this is the case, let me congratulate you. You are made for success and you can just skip over this section.

Only if on occasions you slip into a negative frame of mind, feel free to read on. A negative frame of mind can be turned into a positive one with a plan; with a good dose of willpower and with determination. Provided you do it properly, and provided you are realistic, you will not only improve your gliding but also change your life for the better. Yes, the right mindset will have benefits far beyond your chosen sport and will impact positively on many other aspects of everyday life. Surely, that's enough incentive to give it a go, but the question is where do you start?

Well, the first step is to be realistic when it comes to motivating yourself. You can't expect to break a world record on your very next attempt or become the next world gliding champion overnight. It's just not reasonable and therefore bound to end in disappointment. Be more realistic and set yourself an achievable goal. An early solo pilot, for example, can aim for a one-hour soaring flight, but for a more advanced pilot a sensible goal might be a 500km badge. But whatever you do, you must believe in your abilities and you must be determined

to become an achiever. I know it's easier said than done, but success is not achieved by settling into familiar patterns of behaviour. To climb the ladder of success, a negative mindset must be turned around. Sure, we all get discouraged from time to time, but how we deal with it is what matters most. We need to get our mind into a winning mode and redirect it towards success. Every time a negative thought enters your mind respond with a positive one.

Concentrate on achievements and focus on successful outcomes. That is what positive thinking is all about. By adopting positive thinking, you not only motivate yourself but, simultaneously, others around you. A totally new atmosphere is created, one that breeds success, one of accomplishments and one that fellow pilots will want to embrace.

Positive thinking must be combined with problem-solving skills and the knowledge that the solution to the great majority of problems is to break them down into smaller ones. Put simply, overcome one small obstacle at a time and think of what you have learned while reading this. You have no excuse any longer – it contains all you need to know.

If you hit any obstacle, it is just a matter of remembering the relevant hints or suggestions and then implementing the solutions. If you are facing in the right direction, all you have to do is keep walking. If the solution to your problem doesn't come to mind straight away, read the relevant section of my book again, but, whatever you do, just do not give up on positive thinking.

Talk to yourself and reaffirm that you will manage this challenge and pass the test with flying colours. Practising positive self-talk isn't a lot of hot air – it is essential for gaining the frame of mind necessary for success. Replace negative thoughts with positive ones on every possible occasion. While flying locally, believe in your knowledge and your ability to find a thermal and successfully work the lift. When flying cross-country, have the willpower and determination to make it around the task, even in the most demanding of conditions. Not once, not twice, but every time you step into a glider.

■ This article is an excerpt from Bernard Eckey's *Advanced Soaring Made Easy*. The revised and extended second version is available at £35 from [www.bgashop.co.uk](http://www.bgashop.co.uk)

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