

GOING FOR GOLD



The classroom is as important as the gym when mental as well as muscle strength is essential for success on the racecourse. Andy Rice talks to the RYA psychologist tasked with instilling Team GBR sailors with the discipline and resilience to bring home the gongs

Photos: R.Langdon/Skandia Team GBR



Psychologist Dr Ben Chell (below) coaches sailors on how to bounce back from adversity and develop mental toughness



Many of us think that great sailors are born, not made. Either you've got it or you don't. "If I believed that there wouldn't be much point me doing my job," says Dr Ben Chell. The RYA's lead psychologist works closely with the Olympic sailors in Skandia Team GBR and it is his job to ensure that when the going gets tough, the British sailors have the mental skills not only to cope with the situation, but to turn things to their advantage and even dominate the opposition.

"Certainly there are some people who are born with that edge and are possessed with incredible mental toughness, but I also believe it's a skill you can learn," Dr Chell says.

Just as we accept that our muscles will develop if we go to the gym regularly, so Dr Chell believes the mind responds to practising certain exercises until the right way of thinking becomes second nature.

"In a sport like sailing you have to be able to deal with things that are beyond your control – the vagaries of the wind, a bad decision against you by an umpire, the other competitors in the race," he says. "Things that you can do nothing about may well go against you, but you can't afford to let them affect you. I can be quite harsh with some of the sailors. I've been known to tell them: 'If you can't deal with the unpredictable elements in sailing, then take up another sport, like swimming.' There are some sports where virtually every aspect of your performance is within your control, but sailing certainly isn't one of them."

Dr Chell works with British Olympic coaches

to devise exercises that put the sailors under pressure and teach them how to bounce back from adversity. "It's all about thinking in the present, doing and thinking the most important things for that moment, not getting emotionally caught up in what happened just now, whether it was a bad windshift or a capsize.

"The single biggest lesson I can pass on to the sailors is that you have control of your thoughts. If you let them run away with you and you allow your emotions to take control, your performance will suffer long beyond the incident that made you emotional in the first place.

"The key to mental toughness is to put the past behind you and to keep focused on doing the things that matter now. The more you are able to think logically rather than emotionally, the stronger you will be."

And with the introduction of the Medal Race, the ten-boat final worth double points, Dr Chell believes mental toughness will be an even more crucial factor. "It's an area where the game has changed and something we understand can give our sailors a potential edge. I can't go into any detail, but we have been working with the coaches and sailors to develop successful strategies for this high-pressure scenario.

"From my observations of the Medal Races in regattas, you can see those sailors who sail to win and those who sail not to lose. For me there is a very big difference. Sailing to win is about being proactive, imposing your strengths on the opposition and dictating the run of play to them.

"Sailing not to lose is playing soft and safe, like a soft-hitting tennis player who hopes his opponent will make the mistake. I don't think that approach will work. You have to go out there and impose yourself on the race."

Whereas most regattas can be won with a cautious and conservative approach, the Medal Race requires sailors to discover their killer instinct and it is Dr Chell's job to help the British sailors find theirs.

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