

Taxing Returns

From the April '99 Port City Pacers PaceLeter

5. Subtract line 4 from line 3. If zero or less, **stop**; enter the amount from line 2 above on form 1040, line 38....

That's right, it's April. Tax time in these United States, and that can be stressful. But this time of year also marks the return of racing season for many of us--which can also be stressful. After any long layoff, be it for injury, pregnancy, or the self-imposed exile from racing that winter brings, returning to racing can be as difficult for the mind as it is for the body.

Fear is a big factor. If you haven't raced in a while, competition becomes a big unknown all over again. Do I have what it takes to race as well as I could in October? Have I trained hard enough? Can I handle the pain? And who's that fast-looking guy that just signed up in my age group?

It's okay to be a little nervous about returning to competition--everybody feels it. But some people channel those jitters into a heightened "arousal state" that contributes to good performances, while others are paralyzed by their fears. Race anxiety can have very real physical consequences. It can elevate your heart rate, and it can cause your muscles to tighten, robbing you of precious stride length.

I've competed in three Olympic Trials and have raced all over the world, but even now I'm hardly immune from race anxiety. When my mind starts churning I can feel as much apprehension before an important race as I did when I was just starting out. But luckily over the years I've picked up some tricks along the way that help to settle the nerves before the big ones.

Keep the following in mind in your training and racing, especially if it's been a while since you've laced up those racing flats:

Be prepared. It's a cliché, but when you fail to prepare you prepare to fail. You need to train well to race well. But those workouts do more than make you physically stronger, they make you mentally tough as well. Knowing you've done the work is the surest confidence-booster around. But don't rely on vague memories alone. Keep a training log to record your hard work. Reading back over your log before your race will help to ease your fears.

Pre-test. Don't go into a big race completely cold. Put yourself through a time-trial, either in training or by jumping into an inconsequential race a few weeks before your important competition. If you're shooting for a long race, you can go at full race pace but only go up to 50-60% of race distance--a 5K is a good choice. If you're training for a shorter race, you can go the whole distance in your time trial, but hold yourself back to a 90% effort instead of pulling out all the stops.

See it to believe it. Never underestimate the power of daydreaming. Visualizing yourself relaxed and racing well in the days before your big race can instill loads of confidence. If at all possible, do your last few workouts on the race course itself. Learning the nuances of the route--where the hills and turns are--will give you an edge over your competitors who will be facing the unknown on race day. And any edge you have over your competition can help to boost your confidence.

Be flexible. It's very important to have concrete goals. But lots of athletes become slaves to unrealistic goals, which can lead to a lot of anxiety if their workouts don't go as planned. Injuries, illness, bad weather, and even training "slumps" are all realities that we have to deal with, and sometimes we have to reevaluate our goals.

Even if you think your goal is realistic, you should have a secondary goal to fall back on if things don't go as planned. That way you aren't saddled with the pressure of an "all or nothing" scenario when you race.

A little healthy fear is a good thing--it means you care about the outcome of your racing, and that you want to excel. But treating every race like it's life or death will only wind up giving you ulcers. As my buddy Frank Roosevelt said, "You have nothing to fear but fear itself." Well, fear, and the tax man... Happy returns!

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