

Mental Strength for the Tour du Mont Blanc

“Endurance is the struggle to continue against a mounting desire to stop” – Samuele Marcora, Professor of Sport Science, Università di Bologna

You are going to take somewhere between twelve and twenty hours to finish the Tour du Mont Blanc – assuming you do manage to finish. If you do, you will be amongst the select few who have found the mental and physical endurance to cycle around Europe’s highest mountain in one day. And if you are not just a little apprehensive at the thought of riding 338 km and climbing 8,400m in the same ride, you are either an extremely accomplished ultra-distance cyclist, or you haven’t thought about it for long enough. In a good year, the attrition rate is around 40%. Don’t ask how high it is when the weather is bad.

The Tour du Mont Blanc is a challenge on three levels: mental, physical and nutritional (and in that order). Being physically unfit or failing to eat and drink enough will sabotage your ride as effectively as a catastrophic mechanical failure, but the most likely reason to abandon is mental.

The event is three times more than the typical mountain sportive. For most participants, this will be the longest, toughest day they have ever spent on the bike, and by a significant margin. At the half-way point, you will have ridden almost the equivalent of the Marmotte. But it is still only half way!

If you are going to crack, the most likely place for this to happen is on the col du Petit Saint Bernard. On paper the climb is not too hard: 23 km long at a little over 5%. The problem is that it comes after 220 km, and you can’t help but be aware that it is followed by another 85 km and two more massive climbs. This is where the notion of *“the struggle to continue against a mounting desire to stop”* really makes sense. Any errors you made in pacing over the early climbs will now come home to roost as the accumulated fatigue and the unaccustomed distance combine to whisper in your ear: *“come now, you’ve done enough.”*

It’s very easy to find convincing reasons to stop. It’s getting late. I’m hurting all over. I’m feeling sick. I can’t take anymore sugar. I feel exhausted. It’s too far. It will be dark before I reach the Cornet de Roselend, and I really don’t want to do the descent at night. Who cares whether I finish? What does it matter? Why am I doing this, anyway? Here, the broom-wagon is just here. I have done more than two-thirds: I can be proud of that and just stop here.

But you don’t. You keep going because you’re a fighter, and you won’t accept defeat. You didn’t do all this preparation to stop by the side of the road. You came here to finish so you are damned well going to do it. Somehow, you find the strength to keep turning the pedals. It’s a morale-sapping climb with false-summit after false-summit, and you are tempted to stop again and again before you reach the top, but you always keep going. Other riders are quitting, but not you.

At the summit, you get a huge boost from crossing the French border. It would be very misleading to say that from here on you are assured of finishing, but you have done the toughest part. So long as you maintain a sustainable pace, you keep eating and drinking and you don’t suffer any injuries or

race-ending mechanical failures, the only thing standing between you and the finish is your mental strength and motivation to get there.

TRAIN YOUR BRAIN TO CYCLE FASTER OR FURTHER

If it is true the Tour du Mont Blanc is as much a mental challenge as a physical one (and the research on endurance athletes confirms that it is) we should be finding ways to train our minds as well as our bodies.

To a certain extent, you are already doing this: in fact, any physical training you do will inevitably include some level of mental training. For example, every hard interval session is also training you to tolerate a certain level of pain. Indeed, research has shown that athletes' ability to tolerate pain actually increases the more high-intensity interval training they do, and vice-versa.

To obtain a real performance boost, however, the next step is to deliberately include certain specific mental strategies in your training. Try out and practice these techniques in training to find out what works for you.

SEVEN MENTAL STRATEGIES FOR ENDURANCE PERFORMANCE.

For more detail, [click here for a "how-to" guide to mental strategies.](#)

1. CLEAR GOALS

The first – and most important – is to answer the question “**why am I doing this?**” and set yourself some **clear goals**. The answers are highly individual and you must find them for yourself. Think of goals related to how you will ride (pacing, nutrition, hydration...) and not just to the end result. The former are fully under your control, the latter less so.

2. POSITIVE SELF-TALK

Next, train yourself in **positive self-talk**. This is no more and no less than taking control of your internal dialogue and keeping it positive and constructive. Say things like “*you are doing great, keep it coming...*” Remind yourself **why** you are doing this and how lucky you are to have the opportunity. Remind yourself too **what** you should be doing: stick to your own pace, pedal smoothly and economically, relax your shoulders, take a drink, ...

3. VISUALISATION

Use **visualisation** in the period building up to the Tour du Mont Blanc to see yourself riding it. Your mind needs to get used to the many hours of hard effort, so it is not enough to see yourself finishing. Try to visualise the whole course from start to finish and feel the sensations in your body as you ride it. A full visualisation will take some time (at least ten to twenty minutes). Use Google Street View if you don't know the roads; better still plan a reconnaissance trip!

4. EMBRACE THE PAIN

During a hard effort, the time will inevitably come when your body tells you to slow down. You can train yourself to ignore these signals (for a while). Long climbs at threshold and high-intensity intervals help to accustom both mind and body to sustained, high levels of effort. **Embrace the pain**, welcome the discomfort, enjoy your mind's mastery over your

body... Don't even think of it as pain, but as something positive: smile at it, feel the warm burn spreading through your muscles, feel the power in your legs and the bike driving forward...

5. **DISTRACT YOURSELF**

The Tour du Mont Blanc, though, is likely to push you further than you've been before, to a place where embracing the pain might no longer be helpful. The next strategy to try is **distraction**: block out the sense of effort by thinking about something else, anything that will occupy your mind. Recite a mantra, sing a song, hold an imaginary conversation, **visualise** yourself somewhere else or simply let your mind go blank in a form of **mindfulness meditation**.

6. **FOCUS YOUR ATTENTION**

Distraction works well but carries the risk of losing focus and dropping off the pace. Alternatively, **focus very sharply** on the rear-wheel hub of the rider just in front, on your breathing, or on some aspect of your technique ("light feet, heavy seat" to ensure a rounder, more fluid pedal stroke, for example). If you are on a turbo trainer, **listening to music** can help crowd out the pain while still allowing you to focus on technique.

7. **PLAN FOR THE WORST**

Another useful strategy in mental preparation is **contingency planning**. If you think through in advance everything that might go wrong and have a plan to deal with it, if the worst comes to the worst you'll be ready for it. Some of the risks to think about might include:

- Punctures
- Bad weather
- Heat
- Getting dropped
- Bonking
- Feeling sick
- Suffering from cramps
- Feeling dispirited or negative

INTERESTED IN GOING FURTHER?

[*Mental strategies and tools for endurance cycling*](#)

[*Book review: Endure, by Alex Hutchinson*](#)

[*Riding through the pain barrier*](#)

[*Training Guidelines for the Tour du Mont Blanc*](#)

HOW ALPINE COLS CAN HELP YOU

Two of our coaches have ridden the Tour du Mont Blanc multiple times and know the challenge very well. We can help you prepare in two complementary ways:

1. Sign up for a six-month [*coaching agreement*](#) to receive individual day-to-day coaching and one-on-one advice;

2. Join a one-week *coaching camp* to benefit from a big block of training as well as one-on-one coaching on your technical skills and of course plenty of advice and tips for your preparation and the event itself.