

# All in the mind

You might think you use your legs to cycle, but the way you use your mind can have a significant effect on your pedalling, and can make the difference between winning and losing, as *Dr Nicola J Davies* explains

According to the American writer Robert Bloch, "Any occurrence requiring undivided attention will be accompanied by a compelling distraction." Whether you cycle for leisure or competition, it is likely that you can identify with this statement. From beautiful scenery, to challenging weather conditions, to pedestrians and motor vehicles, cyclists are confronted with many distractions. Psychological training can help you concentrate your mind, ultimately making you a better cyclist.

## WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAINING?

Many athletes say performance is all in the mind. Indeed, it could be claimed that the most successful athletes don't just say this, but believe it wholeheartedly. This is where psychological training can help enhance the performance of cyclists. Cycling isn't just about physical fitness but also mental fitness. Mental fitness includes factors such as concentration, mental toughness, and high levels of self-belief and confidence. Psychological training is an important component of improving athletic performance by targeting mental fitness. Techniques include goal-setting, motivation, affirmations, visualisation, and mindfulness. Here we examine those techniques found to help increase concentration.

## VISUALISE YOUR JOURNEY

You can improve your capacity to concentrate during a particular ride or race by using a technique known as visualisation. This is when you ride the route mentally before taking on the physical challenge. This allows you to think about possible tactics and repeat different scenarios in order to plan your ride or race. During the visualisation, envisage how you look on the bike and identify the points at which nervousness or fatigue may need to be overcome, or where safety could be compromised. Introduce into the visualisation feelings that you are performing well, looking relaxed and confident, and feeling happy with your performance. This will boost your motivation and morale. The result of such visualisation can be a greater awareness of what is likely

to be encountered, and an increased ability to concentrate on achieving the best ride possible.

## SET CLEAR GOALS

Having strong motivation and identifying clear goals will also improve your ability to concentrate. The will to complete your ride or win the race is not enough, unless it is linked to motivation to achieve personal goals. Without a clear understanding of your reasons for engaging in the sport, you are unlikely to experience the satisfaction associated with achievement of personal goals. Once your motivations and goals are clear, you will be able to focus on them rather than being distracted by doubts and fears. Stay focused on your goals by reviewing your progress at regular intervals and if needed making changes that will assist you in reaching the end goal. Giglia says, "I keep a training diary... this allows me to look back over previous training weeks and see how I achieved my goals or, if I haven't achieved them, what I need to do in order to achieve them."

## TRAINING THE MIND

The mind can be trained to deliver instinctive reactions to particular triggers, so that distractions are minimised. These reactions can be refined by using conscious repetition of the preferred reaction to a particular trigger, until the reaction occurs instinctively. Examples include reactions to common risky situations, such as negotiating bends or a steep incline, reacting to bad weather, feeling discomfort or pain, experiencing equipment or clothing malfunctions, or dealing with an accident. Confidence that such instinctive reactions have been acquired assists in avoiding the setbacks that such events may cause. This prevents distractions from interfering with concentration. Visualisation can be a particularly effective method for training your mind in this way.

## 1, 2, 3... BREATHE

Concentration can be a particular issue for long-distance cyclists. Extensive periods are spent on the bike and the desire to finish more quickly than previously can be a

distraction. Dr Ian Kellar, who started riding Audax in 2010, describes his experience of the Audax National 400km: "I was tired, it was dark, and it would have been easy just to count down the kilometres. That would have been grim, as there were still 120 to go." Instead, what helped Kellar was mindfulness. This involved "... a breathing practice where I count my breathing in a pattern and just focus on an aspect of my breathing. I find that by linking my breathing to my pedal stroke, it helps me keep my cadence up. This keeps me sufficiently in the moment so that I don't fall into the trap of wishing I was finished, or focusing on pain or tiredness." Using this technique, Kellar was the second cyclist back, after 17 hours and 42 seconds. "I've still got a sleepless 600km ahead of me," he says. He will no doubt be using mindfulness to help him complete this event.

**Part of your routine**  
Mental techniques need to be practised as much as physical ones. Use some of these tips in training so they are firmly in your mind when it comes to race day.

## CONCENTRATING TO SUCCEED

If you are a competitive cyclist, racing is a sport where cooperation with other competitors, even rivals, can be to your advantage. Without this, attention can be diverted from the race, interrupting your concentration on factors such as speed and rhythm, or preparation for a sprint or a difficult phase ahead, such as a climb. Take the time to familiarise yourself with both written and unwritten rules of the sport, so that compliance becomes second nature. This will increase your self-confidence and provide reassurance that you will behave appropriately in all circumstances. This is essential for freeing the mind for the vital task of concentrating on the event itself.

Training to concentrate should guarantee steady progress in terms of both physical and mental fitness. When asked for tips on increasing concentration, Giglia points out that, "All are very personal to the cyclist and what helps one doesn't necessarily help another."

By trying some of the techniques discussed here, you will be closer to finding your own concentration techniques. In the meantime, in the words of Hilaire Belloc, "We wander for distraction, but we travel for fulfilment." In other words, to travel (or cycle) for fulfilment requires focus.

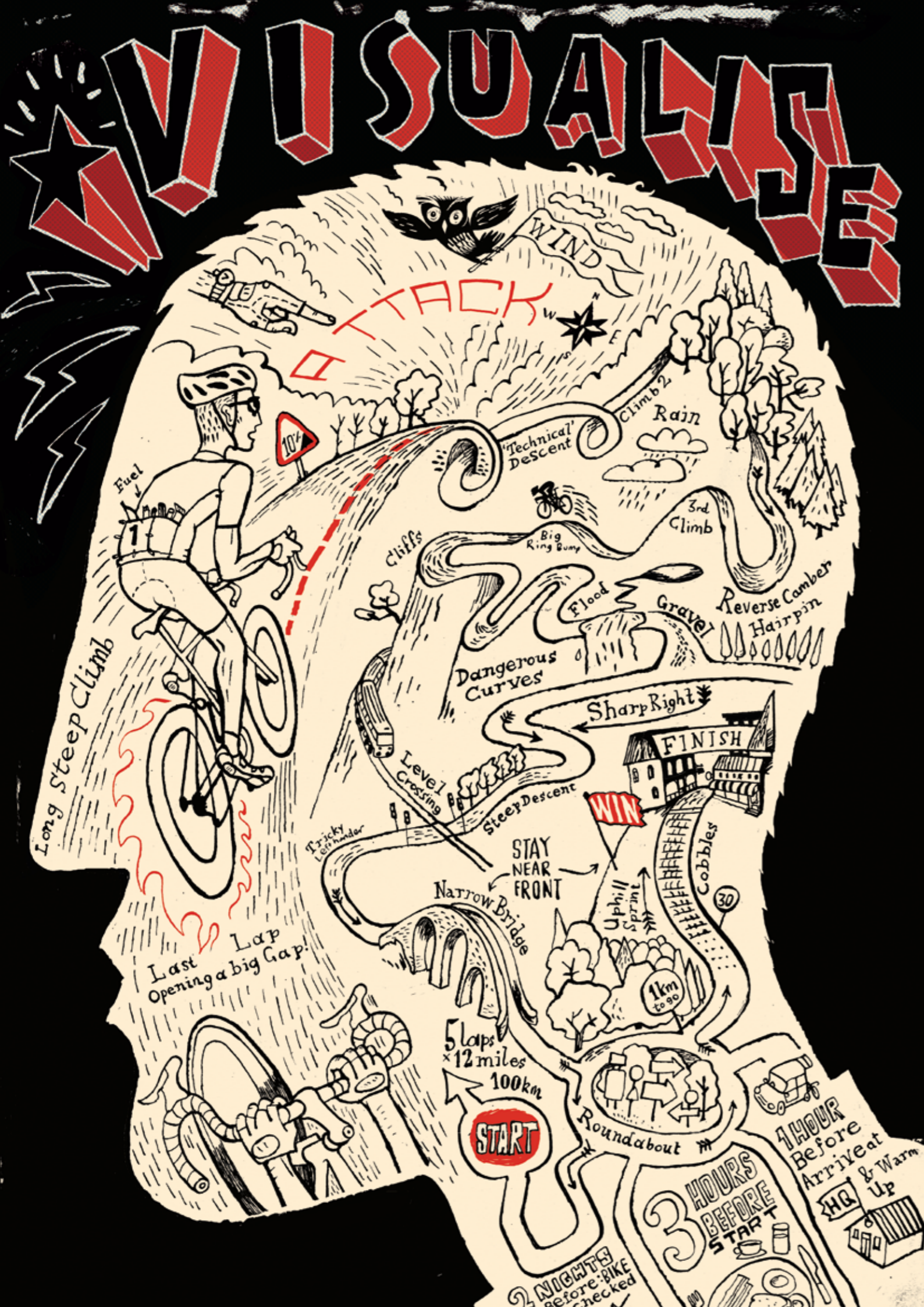


Illustration: Chris Watson