

Running with your head



Alister Thomson talks about race strategy to clinical psychologist Clinton Laurence in an effort to unlock the inner beast a week out from the Gold Coast Marathon column.

Picture: RICHARD GOSLING

ALISTER THOMSON

IT is possible that while reading my columns about training for the Gold Coast Marathon, you have thought of me as an ignorant, uninformed philistine.

And you may be right.

But it is good to know that some of my ideas are backed up by professionals.

I came to this epiphany when talking to clinical psychologist Clinton Laurence, of Parkside Medical.

Mr Laurence has been involved in psychology since the early 1980s when he developed and presented courses in applied sport psychology for coaches and athletes at the University of Queensland Sport and Physical Recreation Association.

So he knows his stuff.

Do you remember when I spoke about breaking the marathon into 10km chunks?

Well this actually has a name – “segmenting”.

So you see, I have not been misleading you!

I spoke to Mr Laurence to get his thoughts on the psychology of running, particularly in the lead-up to the big day, which is next Sunday.

“Segmenting is a good idea. It is very important to break it up. If you think, ‘oh 42km’, you think, ‘oh no’. Break it up into 10km segments,” he said.

Mr Laurence said it was advisable to use a dissociation or distraction strategy while training but then switch to an association – or more race-focused plan – while running the marathon.

“What has come out of the research is that elite marathoners use a lot of dissociation/distraction strategies while in training,” he said.

“They are trying to do the miles. Running can be boring. They let their mind wander.

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PSYCHOLOGIST CLINTON LAURENCE

“But when they are in the race – and mainly because of the intensity – they are 100 per cent focused on the race.”

That is part and parcel of having a plan or strategy for race day.

Mr Laurence said it was important to keep an eye on your pace so that you are not going too fast or slow. It is easy to get caught up in the excitement.

I am planning to do the marathon in about five hours – no backbreaking pace.

“People doing it at a moderate pace could use dissociative strategies,” Mr Laurence said.

“However as the fatigue builds, you can’t distract yourself and you must employ associative strategies.”

I always worry the night before a big event – sporting or otherwise – that I won’t get a good night’s rest. It turns out I’ve been worrying about the wrong night.

“We are quite good at focusing on little sleep. People doing Olympic events do not necessarily get a good night’s sleep the night before. That is because you are very conscious of the next day’s event.

“But the body is amazing. OK, you get six hours instead of eight, it won’t make a huge amount of difference.”

But it is the night before the night before race day that is most important.

“If the night before the night before the race you get a bad’s night sleep, that could impact on your race because then you’ve had two bad nights in a row,” he said.

Mr Laurence said visualisation (something I have also talked about) was another tool.

“On the morning there might be some critical things, the last 5km, you might go over that. There is nothing like visualising what you want to do to keep away negative thoughts.”