

Do you think TOO much?

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One of the biggest myths of sport psychology is it encourages athletes to think, and think. This then leads to a familiar refrain of “why would I want to think more, I just want to do it. Besides, it sounds like work I don’t have time for.”



I couldn’t agree more.

Ironically, most people do need to think less, and it’s a daunting challenge trying to get them there.

Thinking: The good stuff

Thinking and dissecting are valuable assets when you are learning. Remember when you were first learning about your sport? Your coach had to break down the steps for you, and you likely felt self conscious. But over time, as you gained familiarity with the steps they became a complete whole.

This learning and dissecting stage can be a little awkward. You will be uncomfortable as you force yourself to be vigilant of what exactly you are doing. There are a lot of instructions to yourself you have to keep track of, a lot of chatter going on in that head of yours.

It’s not hard to see how thinking and analyzing fits well into training. This is the optimal time for this style of thinking to be prominent. You need to scrutinize the steps, and dissect where you might have gone wrong with the process until you develop proficiency. Incidentally, it is believed it’s the left side of your brain that helps you out with all this examination. It is sometimes referred to as the “analyzer”.

When thinking goes bad: Paralysis by Analysis

A lot of thinking is actually not so great for your performance. While it’s the left-brain that assists us in analysis, it’s the right side that puts everything together. This is why the right side is sometimes called the “integrator”. Have you ever noticed how your very best performances had that “flow” quality? That’s because you let go and allowed things to happen. Performance has an awful lot to do with trust. You have to trust yourself, trust in your training and just let it happen. The right brain helps you to do this, allowing your instincts and muscle memory to do what you know how to do.

But all too often we end up interfering with this process by “thinking too much”. By breaking down a process we now know as a whole, well, the whole tends to fall apart. This breakdown is often and aptly referred to as “paralysis by analysis”.

You know you are in the grip of the over thinking trap you find yourself unable to do something you know very well. Suddenly you feel awkward, even clumsy. You find yourself going through a lot of verbal instruction in your head and it may be hard to connect it with what is actually happening. Another signal you may be a victim of this trap is stress.

Thinking too much and nerves:

The thinking too much trap frequently happens when we are nervous. It’s an unfortunate part of the flight or fight syndrome. Something inside you says “danger” and your body and mind react automatically. The danger could be a judge, people watching you or the fear of failure. Your body pumps more blood to your major muscles in case you need to get away or fight a foe. It moves away from your digestive system, while stomach acid floods your stomach causing those much-hated butterflies. And your mind? Well, your left-brain goes into over drive, and starts chatting away at you. It says “I’ve analyzed this and it doesn’t look good for you”, “what if this happens what if that happens”, “oh, you are in big trouble! Maybe you should quit now, you can’t hack it” On and on it goes, all the while your focus is narrowing down to a tunnel. You can’t take in all the vital information you need to make your performance work. Pretty soon that chatter turns into reality and you choke.

But I don’t want to paint a horrid picture of one half of your brain. As discussed, it is a good worker; you just have to put it to the right kind of task. Now, how is it you can turn this too much thinking thing around?

Getting out of the thinking trap:

There are a number of strategies you can implement to free you from the confines of paralysis by analysis. What they all have in common is the activation of your right hemisphere. You might even say this is what “performing in your right mind” looks like.

- Get to know what each style is like: the next time you make an error in training experiment with two different approaches. Try stopping and dissecting your training. Take it apart piece by piece and walk yourself through the correction. Talk away to yourself; even exaggerate your self-talk to the extreme. Alternate this with trying to just picture your correction in your mind and then without any further thought, do it. When you compare and contrast these two different approaches you will likely see the power of the right brain.
- Direct your focus to physical sensations: Put your focus on the feel of your body, or the execution of a skill. The more you place your mind on what your senses

have to tell you, the less it will be on all that chatter in your head. Your mind will want to trick you, tell you it needs to listen, that is has vital information to keep you safe. Don't buy into this. You need to be in there here and now, and there is no quicker route there than through your senses.

- Generate an image: What kind of an outcome are you trying to achieve? Maybe it's an "attack" approach. You could try conjuring up a picture of a charging rhino, a pit bull, or even Clint Eastwood. What if you need to be brave? How about a well-armored knight riding into battle? The lion from the Wizard of Oz?
- Play a sound-bite: If there was a soundtrack that would best fit the ride or kind of mood you would like to encourage in yourself, what would it be? Back in my riding days, one of my favorites was the theme from the movie Caddyshack. Because it was light and kind of cocky, it helped me lighten up and loosen up before hitting the ring. Hear whatever you like in your head, country, hard rock or even Abba! No one will ever know what tunes you are playing in your head, but they'll see the smile on your face and the confidence in your ride.
- Develop a cue phrase: Remember Muhammad Ali's famous line, "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee"? This helped him get in the mood to fight, to be his best. What could be your line? This is not to be confused with a lot of left-brain talk. It's just a simple phrase that packs big emotional punch. Some examples include "go hard or go home", and "bring it on".

The central idea here is to move to action and away from dissection. Action dissipates tension and adrenaline and channels your energy in the right direction. It's like Nike says: "just do it".

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