

THE FOCUS FACTOR

Staying Mentally Sharp For The Whole Tournament Day

By Tom Presnell - Executive Editor

If there is a single, overriding factor in tournament bass fishing that can make or break your competition day, it's *focus*. Other factors, like weather conditions, temperature, fishing partner, rods, reels, lures and finding fish are all secondary, to simply maintaining your concentration over an eight hour stretch. Both pro anglers and top Federation anglers agree, that sometimes there are days when you are just fishing for five bites. You could have hours of time go by without a nibble, and then suddenly have to react in a heartbeat in order to set the hook and land the fish. It can be mentally grueling.

I decided to examine what it takes, both mentally and physically, to be a successful angler. To help me construct this analysis, I was able to enlist my father, who has a lot of experience exploring people's mindset. Dr. William Presnell is not only the guy who took me fishing as a kid and through my teens, but he's also a practicing psychologist, with over thirty years experience in dissecting people's psyches. He has studied and counseled people of innumerable backgrounds and occupations, including athletes, musicians, police officers and clergy, just to name a few. Although he doesn't hit the water as much as he once did, he still enjoys the great outdoors. So I felt confident that he'd be able to break down the psychological components of what makes up a complete tournament angler.

THE INTERVIEWER GETS SHRINKED:

Before I could field even one question, Dr. Presnell performed an exercise on *me*, asking me to walk through one specific tournament where I felt everything had come together. My last club tournament of 2007 immediately came to mind. Not only had I won it, but it was under some difficult circumstances. My partner had bailed on me at the last minute and the Fall crankbait pattern I knew was working just 3-4 days earlier was not panning out.

I stuck to my game plan for almost the entire tournament, but with 90 minutes left to go and only one keeper to

show for it, I knew I had to make a change. Instead of fishing for largemouth in weedy coves, I switched gears and ran to a specific rocky point that had some current swirling around it. Translation: smallmouth territory. I tied on a small black grub on a jighead, parked the boat behind the point and just let the current drag the lure out in front of the point. I had a big one pick it up after just one cast, but she threw it on the first jump.

Although I was incredulous over losing that fish, my hopes were still high, because it told me they were there. Within a half hour I had my limit, including a 3½ pounder that broke my spinning rod on the hookset. I had to hand reel the fish in, but that one ended up winning me the tournament. It gave me great satisfaction knowing that, even though I had stayed mentally disciplined and on my intended pattern, my gut instinct overruled my logic. This decision had afforded me some success.

After relaying the story to Dr. Presnell, he was able to piece together the puzzle of how I was able to stay focused, even though the majority of the day was not successful. He said I combined the use of my knowledge base, intuition and inventiveness to finally succeed. "Curiosity and inventiveness are two strong psychological qualities of fishermen," Dr. Presnell explained. "If you are *not* curious and inventive, you'll most likely get skunked." He also said that I stayed determined and maintained an attitude that I was going to do well. That, and the 'mental jolt' of losing that fish, was a good recipe for refocusing for the remainder of the day.

After a lengthy discussion, we reached a consensus on what it takes to be a completely focused competition angler. Some of these concepts I have been unknowingly practicing for years and some are downright, eye-opening ideas. This is what the good doctor was able to point out:

VISUALIZATION: Like many anglers the night before a tournament, it's a good idea to have already rigged your

rods for the next day and lay in bed that night visualizing your game plan. Dr. Presnell said that this is an excellent way to walk through any competition, and that many successful pro athletes use this tactic before competition. Also keep in mind, everything is connected to everything else and the way that you perform on tournament day, includes what you did the night before. So trying to mentally rehearse, or practice the night before can be very positive.

KNOWLEDGE BASE: There's no substitute for preparation. Being familiar with the body of water and it's seasonal tendencies can be comforting in the hours prior to the tournament. This comfort can lead to confidence and confidence can lead to a good performance. Dr. Presnell suggests, "Try to think like the fish you are trying to catch and put yourself in the fish's place." This can be years of experience, reading the environment, word of mouth or just being aware of specific areas to go on the map.

CONFIDENCE: Having confidence in your own ability and performance is key to putting bass in the boat. But Dr. Presnell stressed that it's very important to not get overly confident. "Don't psyche yourself up so much, that you'll be crushed with failure," he says. "The goal is to ride the wave without getting to psyched up and carry that confidence at a healthy level throughout the entire day." At times, getting pumped up can actually have a negative effect. "Only to a certain point do you get a performance benefit out of increased intensity," he goes on to explain. "Sometimes it can actually fold back and work against you."

PHYSICAL FITNESS: Being physically fit can make a huge difference when you spend eight-plus hours on the water. Being in good enough shape to endure most of the day on your feet, and possibly encountering extreme weather or water, is paramount to maintaining a good performance throughout the day.



Missing a fish is a scenario all tournament fishermen are familiar with, but it's important to put it behind you quickly and avoid negative self-talk.

"Stamina is a leading cause of performance loss and can be directly related to good health and fitness," Dr. Presnell adds. Another helpful thing to do, is to engineer comfort into your day on the water. Wear the appropriate amount of clothing and taking a couple minutes to stretch regularly is recommended. Avoid alcohol and excessive caffeine and sugar, as these can effect your blood flow and your muscle's ability to react properly.

INTUITION: Of all the factors that help to maintain proper mental focus, intuition is one of the most intangible. Dr. Presnell explains, "There tends to be an ecology to fishing and forming a pattern, and intuition has a lot to do with that. There are so many variables to contend with during the course of the day and you have to examine different criteria (water temperature, sunlight, wind, barometric pressure, moon phases) in order to make intuitive decisions," Presnell says. "What happens is an interaction between lot's of things. It's at this point you ask yourself, do I listen to the advice of others, or do I trust my own gut instinct and experience? What does your gut tell you that your head didn't lead you to?"

Ways To Improve Your Mental Focus On The Water

1. Stay physically fit enough to endure a long day on the water
2. Visualize your game plan the night before
3. Go in with the mindset of what you are going after and where
4. Be flexible and adjust as the day develops
5. Avoid negative self-talk if you make mistakes
6. Set any previous distractions aside for the tournament
7. Stay focused in the present and don't let your mind wander
8. Involve all your senses in your decision-making process

FLEXIBILITY: Flexibility is an angler's friend. Trusting one's own intuition and making the correct decisions on the water at the right time is paramount, but being flexible enough to use that intuition is also key. "Flexibility is the capacity to make good decisions," Dr. Presnell explains. "You have this tremendous base of knowledge, but allowing yourself to draw on it and have flexibility of mind is so important."

CONCENTRATION: It can't be stressed how psychologically important concentration is to the sport of competitive angling. We all know how critical it is to pay attention at all times to what your rod, line and lure are doing and not let your mind wander. You can go long periods of time without a bite, and then suddenly have to react. To do this, you need to focus your attention on relevant environmental cues and be able to maintain that attention for a continued good performance. It's also a good idea to block out past events (like losing a fish) as well as future events (like the consequences of losing a fish). In a nutshell, stay focused in the present.

DISTRACTIONS:

"The ability to set aside distractions is usually due more to personality," Dr. Presnell says. "Some people are just more prone to let things worry them." He recommends trying to set aside any problems temporarily—mentally shelving them for the time being. "The ability to focus can be distracted by things that happened at home, or just prior to the tournament," he adds. Some individuals also tend to concentrate too much on what others are doing. This can be counter-productive and take away from their own performance. It's also a good idea to avoid negative self-talk. This is when you have a lapse in concentration and begin verbally berating yourself for your mistake. Again, this can only distract you from the task at hand and lead to poor performance.

SPORTS MINDEDNESS: This is all about competition and the effect it has on individuals. "Some people's competitiveness borders on pathological," Dr. Presnell explains. "A good rule of thumb is to notice and learn from your competition, but compete against your own best. In other words, try to enjoy not only your performance, but the performance of others," he adds. "It's important to get the best out of the sport, the camaraderie, the fellowship, the sense that you have a common purpose, the communion with nature and the challenge that nature provides."

Competitive bass fishing is an intensely mental sport. Which ever way you analyze it, being able to control mind over matter is the rule of the day. It presents a challenge every time you decide to show up for a tournament and focus on the methods to get the job done. An angler who can successfully combine these methods, should never rule out the possibility of winning. **FL**