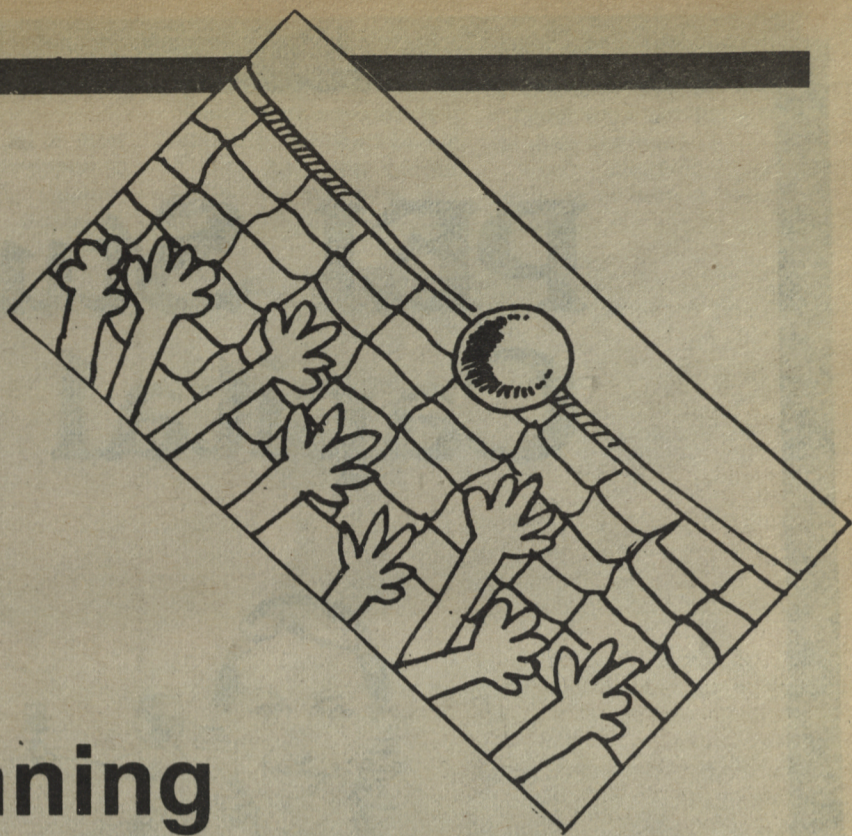


# Sports feature:

## The psychology of athletics



# Is winning all in the mind?



By Jane Antoniuk

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Canadian athletes seeking gold at the upcoming summer Olympics know it's not just sweat, muscles and training that make sport champions. Winning is all in the mind.

Under the close watch of nutritionists, specialized sports doctors, physical therapists and coaches, athletes are nearing their physical limits. Psychological training is now making the difference between Olympic gold and not qualifying for the medal round.

"I think the mind is what mostly affects the physical performance," says Maria Bassakyros, 21, a discus thrower with the Scarborough Optimist Track Club in Toronto.

Bassakyros uses a technique developed by University of Ottawa professor Terry Orlick, a pioneer in Canada's fast growing corps of sports psychologists.

"A lot is decided before the gun goes (to start a race) in terms of how you are thinking, whether you are say you can do it or you can't do it," said Orlick. "And how much you are committing yourself to push to the limit or take a risk in some sports. All that goes on before the event starts."

Many Canadian coaches and athletes are followers of Orlick's techniques, as outlined in his book, In Pursuit of Excellence.

The former international class gymnast believes exercising the mind in sports is a critical element at the elite level of competition, where everyone is good, in great shape, committed and extensively trained. He gets athletes to block everything out of their heads except the sporting event. Athletes go over in their minds every detail of a good performance.

Bassakyros' self relaxation techniques involve listening to a tape of herself with music in the background, telling her to relax starting with her toes. "Then at the point when my whole body is relaxed, I rest for three minutes and my voice tells me to think of a time when I have had a successful happening."

Toronto shot putter Martino Calatan uses the same "blocking out" techniques as Bassakyros. "I think only about throwing the shot as far as I can and using all my energies. Every little psychological edge helps."

National throwing coach Ivan Pintrac also uses Orlick's approach. "Psychological factors will influence our performance," says Pintrac. "I try to get my athletes to keep

the rhythm the same on the day of competition as in practice, and to be confident."

Ottawa javelin coach Bill Heikkila is a strict disciple of Orlick's methods. His athletes mentally picture every detail of how they felt during an ideal throw, right down to how their grip on the javelin felt.

"Ultimately, they are able to switch it on and off so it can run through, brrrrrrrr, like a film in their heads. If they panick before a meet, their minds can kick in and their bodies will automatically perform."

After years of physical training, an athlete's ability rarely fluctuates from one hour to the next during an event like the Olympics. When athletes are equally trained mechanically and physically, Orlick says, the winner is determined by an ability to control worry and activational levels, by concentrating and focusing on the event.



Canadians are on the edge of recognizing the value of mind training in sports, says Orlick. Because physical training is more equal among countries, athletes are looking for the extra push to help them win.

"Canada and the United States are the best in this field right now because we combine academic and applied backgrounds in sports psychology," says Orlick. "We have bright and young psychologists who were also athletes."

Orlick said Canadian work on sports psychology is "snapped up by other countries and translated as quickly as it comes out."

Canadians in pursuit of excellence at the Los Angeles summer Olympics will see if Orlick's tough minded approach to winning will pay off.