

July 2008

Overcoming Fatigue

Randy Borum

University of South Florida, wborum@usf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/mhlp_facpub

 Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Borum, Randy, "Overcoming Fatigue" (2008). *Mental Health Law & Policy Faculty Publications*. Paper 567.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/mhlp_facpub/567

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mental Health Law & Policy at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mental Health Law & Policy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.



* **Overcoming Fatigue**

"Fatigue makes cowards of us all."

—Vince Lombardi

What do you do when you're completely exhausted, spent and "done," but there's still time left on the clock? Fatigue can be your toughest opponent, simultaneously attacking your thoughts, emotions and body, trying to get you to quit.

Fatigue is not all in your head, but how you react and respond to it can determine how it affects your performance. Sports psychologists investigating the "motivational intensity theory" find that when the going gets tough, the degree of effort that people put out is determined by the justifiability—is it worth it?—and attainability—is it possible to do it?—of the goal.

Interestingly, research shows that those same motivational factors also determine whether your cardiovascular system will react to help you exert more effort when you need it most. This means that motivational factors under your control can and will affect your performance when you're fatigued.

Because of the explosive nature of martial arts competition, the conditioning a person receives from miles and miles of jogging isn't optimal, the author says. (For illustrative purposes, Vernon "Tiger" White is shown.)

Building on these scientific findings, you discover two immediate implications: It's essential that you set goals and use them constantly to drive your motivation; and when the demands are high, feeling confident and keeping a positive attitude will help you push through.

Fighting through fatigue is really about preparation, not just about digging deep during the heat of competition. How do you prepare to sprint when you're already running on fumes? Here's a three-pronged approach:

- **Train to the specific energy demands of your sport.** The human body uses different systems of energy depending on the intensity and duration of the activity. For years, "road work" was considered the cornerstone of conditioning for boxers. While running may have its place in

PHOTO BY FERNANDO ESCOBAR

FEAR ★ NO ★ MAN

**Discover The
Secret That The
Martial Artists
And The Military
Don't Want You
To Know...**

FREE VIDEOS

www.CloseCombatTraining.com

**Or call for your full
FREE info kit AND
Close Combat Adventures
newsletter subscription
(FREE \$197 Value)
directly toll-free:**

1-888-765-3731

WARNING: FREE Newsletter Subscription Limited To
First 100 Callers From Black Belt Magazine ONLY

Even if you're physically in good shape, you may still 'gas' if you haven't adequately developed your mental game.

combat-sports training, jogging for several miles at a time doesn't mirror the biological demands of fighting. Whether you're a boxer, mixed martial artist, wrestler or point-karate specialist, you're not typically required to maintain a constant, low-level energy output over a half-hour period with no rest.

Instead, the combat sports generally require multiple, intermittent bursts of power at maximal or near-maximal levels, with short periods of rest in between. The oxygen and metabolic energy demands are quite different. So sprints and interval-type training, for example, match the sport-specific energy demands better than a four-mile jog. You'll fatigue much less quickly when you've trained your body to anticipate the energy demands of competition. Think also about the mental demands of your competition environment such as lights, crowds and bad calls from the officials, and prepare for those in training, as well.

- **Minimize wasted energy.** Even if you're physically in good shape, you may still "gas" if you haven't adequately developed your mental game. Tension, anxiety and worry also consume energy and personal resources. Negative thoughts compete with your preparation and focus. Constant tension in your muscles makes them tire more quickly. Jittery feelings, if you perceive them negatively, activate your sympathetic nervous system and cause your body to prepare for a threat, potentially using lots of energy in a way that hinders your performance. By learning to control your level of physiological arousal and manage your thoughts and self-talk, you can minimize the amount of energy that's wasted.

Breathing is an important part of this. If you're breathing irregularly or holding your breath while exerting yourself—which isn't uncommon—you're limiting the amount of oxygen available to your muscles and brain. Learning to breathe from your diaphragm and doing it regularly, even under demanding physical conditions, should be a priority.

- **Maximize positive, productive energy.** Remember that goal attainability is one of the main drivers of your effort when you're fatigued. Attainability doesn't just refer to the level of task difficulty but also to your belief in your own ability. Psycholo-

gists call it self-efficacy, but most athletes just refer to it as confidence. It's essential to enter a competition with a deeply rooted faith in your own ability to perform well and succeed. This starts in training. Try not to give voice or credibility to self-limiting beliefs or unproductive thoughts. When you're training, practice keeping your focus on the present. Don't allow yourself to say, "I don't know if I can do it." Avoid looking at the clock or worrying about how much time is left in a workout. Just perform in the moment.

How do you further develop that confident energy? The best source of confidence is past experiences of success, whether they occurred in training or competition. Recall your past successes often, remembering specifically how you felt and how they happened. Another source of positive emotion is self-talk. Try to direct that voice in your head. Don't just wait for it to react. Rehearse and repeat positive messages about your skills. Connecting with your personal feelings of success and competence, settling your body into your optimal zone of intensity and creating a positive thought environment should be highlights of your pre-competition routine.

You'll also benefit from having a plan to restore your positive mind-set if you happen to encounter a setback. Many fighters and athletes have had success using "cue words" to help them refocus. Choose one or two words that have personal significance to help bring you back positively and fully into the present. Energy-draining distractions usually crop up because you're thinking about something that's already happened or something that might happen. Your cue words can drag you back to the present.

Fatigue can be a formidable opponent, but with a smart conditioning plan, confidence and pre-competition preparation, you can keep your mind and body infused with the positive energy you need to prevail. ✕

*About the author:
Dr. Randy Borum is a professor at the University of South Florida. He's a licensed and board-certified psychologist recognized by the National Institute of Sports Professionals. For more information, visit www.blackbeltmag.com/archives/who/.*