

The Eyes Have It

By Marc Evans

Ever wonder what's behind the wearing of sunglasses by movie stars at night? Or, musicians performing...or someone just talking with you? Well, for me I've always (at least most of the time) taken my sunglasses off when talking with someone. Why? Simply, to make "eye" contact letting the person know I am paying attention...interested and respectful...not looking around while they are speaking.

My guess is many of these people veil something as I am a believer that the "eyes are the windows to the soul". Now, it could be as simple as shyness or perhaps, in some instances jetlag or a hangover. Nonetheless, sunglasses are a ubiquitous part of society and yes, endurance athletics.

To be sure, there are more valid reasons for the endurance athlete to wear sunglasses than say a movie star. Protection from UV's, wind, radiation, debris and yes, hiding your eyes from your competitors is but a few uses. More importantly however, behind the glass the eyes take in external cues, which transfer information to the brain for processing. What an athlete does with this information play a significant role in performance.

Coaching athletes to perform at optimal levels require a comprehensive application of physiology, biomechanics and psychology. The most important of these is the latter, psychology. I've known and coached many endurance athletes who possessed the most impressive physical credentials, but without an unshakable mental approach they would rarely, if ever, reach the full potential of their physiology and biomechanical abilities.

This goes for all of us no matter what our genetic capabilities...it is the mind which limits successful outcomes. I often speak to athletes about the significance of retaining energy..."not giving any of your energy away" to matters, which have no relevance on the outcome you wish to realize.

Perhaps, the motorist who "cuts you off or tailgates" is a good example. We've all experienced this and too, have responded negatively. The result is never positive for "you" it simply takes "energy" away from to respond defensively or assertively. On the other hand, letting the person go have his or her own way...well, this is the best and least energy depleting response.

So, what does this have to do with the eyes? Everything! The eyes are the pathways to the mind that in turn tells us how to respond to a given circumstance. If an athlete

practices "neutral eyes" there is less chance of losing "energy" to other factors that have an effect on, influence and distract performance.

Here's the training technique I coach which should become second nature over time. Simply, relax the eyes focusing on everything, but nothing particular outside of your body. Keep your energy within yourself, as this is your most necessary "fuel" to protect. "Giving" away energy to anything other than yourself has little benefit to you...especially, unconstructive factors, which do not sustain, lift and further your performance.

Oftentimes, an athlete will "respond" when overtaken in competition finding more "energy" as she is awoken. I will always ask, "Where was that energy before that moment?" Could it be the athlete was restraining performance by being too connected to outside factors?

Years ago I helped Scott Tinley (who I coached later) come from 70th to 2nd in the IRONMAN simply by saying, "...focus, second place is not all that bad..." At the time, he'd "given up" at 70 miles into the bike leg. As I drove past, I couldn't believe he'd fallen back so far...speaking to him from my car he regained the determined, athletic focus I'd become familiar with. After crossing 2nd he thanked me which remains one of the most memorable moments in my coaching career.

The point being his "eyes" focused as Scott unwaveringly spent the next 5 hours passing 68 athletes. In those days, the athletes weren't wearing sunglasses; there were not aerobars...and little, if any scientific ergogenic aid to help maintain energy. Yet, as he passed more and more cyclists than runners his "eyes" were keenly focused on everything, but nothing which took "energy" away from him...only on things which gave him "energy".