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Sport psychology professor helps Canadian Olympians conquer the mental game of running

WATERLOO – Kim Dawson says she helps elite athletes to run fast so she doesn't have to herself.

Dawson, a professor of sport psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University, works with a group of high-performance runners who train out of the Speed River Track and Field Club in Guelph, Ontario. And with four of her athletes bound for the London Olympics, she can afford to take it easy in her own recreational athletics.

"I go for a run and don't worry about a thing," she says. "It's a little unfair, actually."

Dawson's four Olympics-bound runners are marathoners Eric Gillis and Reid Coolsaet, steeplechaser Alex Genest, and 1500-metre specialist Hilary Stellingwerff. She works with them to develop psychological techniques for fending off slumps, dealing with injuries, peaking at the right time, managing their emotions over the course of a race, and "having a life" outside of running, a sport that requires participants to seek out huge helpings of physical pain.

"Just as there's a whole arsenal of physical skills that runners need, there's a whole arsenal of mental skills, too," she says. "First and foremost, the athletes have to learn that the first thought they have doesn't have to be the thought they keep – they're capable of changing their emotions."

Dawson helps her athletes to set short- and long-term goals, and then create action plans for achieving those goals. She encourages them to "live their whole lives" early in the training cycle, then narrow their focus as a big race approaches.

Individual events are broken down into several stages, each with its own mental game plan. In the marathon, for instance, the first 10 kilometres are about relaxation and optimizing body mechanics. Passing the halfway mark provides an emotional boost that is carefully harnessed in the drive to the finish line.

"Nothing is unprepared," Dawson says. "They are in complete control – it's about being consistent."

The pressure and distractions of the Olympics present special challenges to any athlete, and Dawson has been working with her runners to deal with those hurdles. In the lead-up to the games, she has been coaching them on "event management" around their races and on developing specific mental race strategies.

"The Olympic Games are so massive, there can almost be a stigma attached to them," she says. "We actually call it the Big O, and we do a lot of work helping the athletes to keep their perspective amid the hoopla."

Working with elite runners has provided Dawson with a wealth of knowledge about the psychology of high-performance athletics. She's been sharing her expertise in a column in *Canadian Running* magazine, in seminars and talks, and in her sports psychology classes at Laurier, which are studded with examples drawn from her training work.

Whatever happens for each of the four athletes on race day in London, Dawson takes satisfaction in knowing they are not just physically, but also mentally, prepared for the race of their lives.

“It’s so thrilling to help these runners meet their potential,” she says. “When they get an outcome I know they deserve because they’ve worked so hard for it, it’s just a wonderful thing to see.”

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