



STOP HOPING. START TRAINING.

The Calibration Audit Implementation Guide

A Systematic Protocol for Training Mental Toughness

David Schary, Ph.D.

davidschary.com

About the Author:



David Schary is a sport psychology professor and licensed mental health counselor specializing in mental performance training for rowers. Using neuroscience and sport psychology, he helps rowers train their brains with the same precision and discipline required for every stroke. As a professor, counselor, former rower and coach, and contributor to [Row360](#), David brings years of experience both on the water and in the classroom.

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SLIDE 1: TITLE SLIDE

STOP HOPING. START TRAINING

The Neuroscience of Mental Toughness

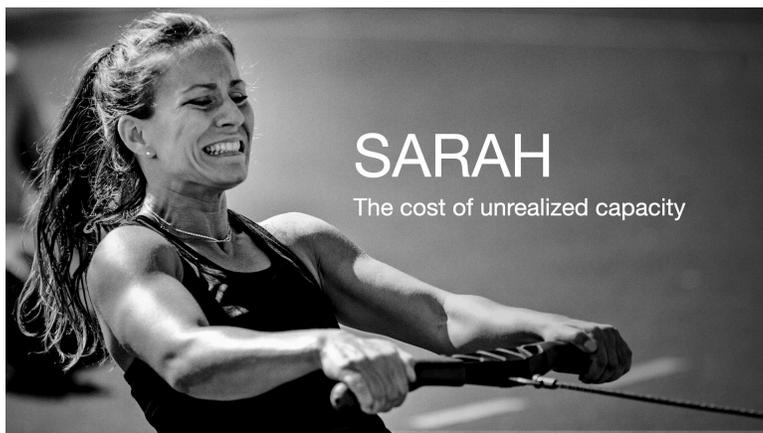
COACH ANNOTATION

Most coaches hope their athletes are mentally tough enough when it counts. But hope isn't a strategy.

The premise of this keynote: Mental toughness isn't a personality trait you select for, it's a biological system you can train with the same precision you train physical fitness, strength, and technique.

By the end of this guide, you'll understand:

1. What's actually happening in your athlete's brain when they fade
2. Why traditional "just be tougher" coaching doesn't work
3. A systematic, measurable protocol to recalibrate their nervous system
4. Exactly how to implement it starting Monday



SLIDE 2: SARAH - THE COST OF UNREALIZED CAPACITY

The Story:

- Junior year rower
- Crushing workouts, technically sound, strong aerobic base
- Every erg test: looked great through 1000m, then faded
- With 750m left, it was already over
- Desperately frustrated every time

What the coach did: Told her to be tougher. Dig deeper. Want it more.

What happened: Nothing changed.

COACH ANNOTATION

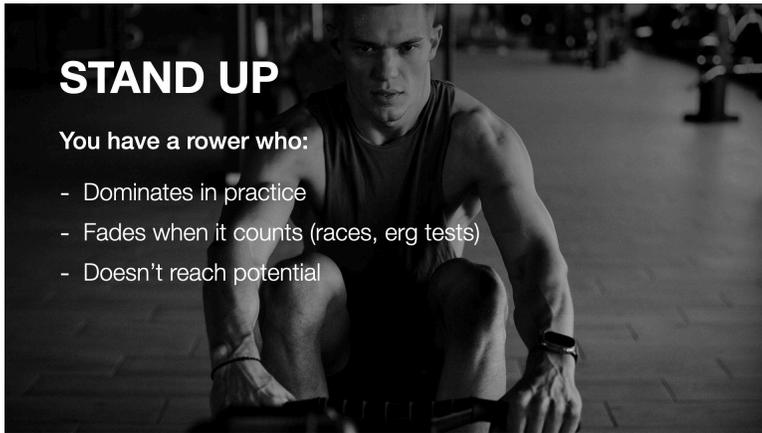
Sarah represents the athlete you probably have on your roster right now. The problem wasn't that Sarah lacked mental toughness or didn't want it enough. She had a **miscalibrated nervous system**, and nobody had ever taught her how to train it properly.

The coaching mistake: Treating a skills deficit like a character flaw.

Here's what you need to understand: When you tell an athlete to "be tougher" or "want it more," you're speaking to their rational brain (System 2). But during intense effort, that brain shuts down. The automatic brain (System 1) takes over, and it doesn't respond to motivation or willpower. It responds to systematic training and pattern recognition.

Key insight: You can't coach character into an overprotective nervous system. You have to train the nervous system itself.

This is why Sarah's story matters: It took 10+ years of education and research to figure out what was actually happening and how to fix it. This guide gives you that solution without the decade of trial and error.



SLIDE 3: INTERACTION - STAND UP

You have a rower who:

- Dominates in practice
 - Fades when it counts (races, erg tests)
 - Doesn't reach potential
-

COACH ANNOTATION

If you have an athlete who fits this profile, you're not alone. This is one of the most common, and most frustrating, problems in rowing.

What makes it frustrating: You know they have the physical capacity. The fitness is there. The technique is there. But something invisible is holding them back.

What makes it hard to solve: Most coaches don't have a systematic framework for addressing mental performance. We measure and track everything physical (meters, watts, rigging to the millimeter), but we stop with the mental side. We hope they figure it out, try sporadic interventions, and feel helpless when nothing works.

The good news: This is a solvable problem. It's not about their character, their desire, or some mystical "it factor" they either have or don't. It's about training a biological system that currently operates on faulty data.

We measure & track **EVERYTHING...** PM4

- Meters rowed
- Watts generated
- Rigging boats to the millimeter

...**BUT** stop with the mental side.



The image shows a digital rowing monitor with a monochrome LCD screen. The screen displays several rows of data: '0 | 24' at the top, a large '2:14' with '500m' below it, '2:59:03.1147*' in a larger font, '2:07.3' with 'ave 500m' below it, ':52' with 'split time' below it, and '2:59:03' with 'projected finish' below it. Below the screen are three buttons labeled 'CHANGE UNITS', 'CHANGE DISPLAY', and 'MENU BACK'. The device is labeled 'PM4' in the top right corner.

SLIDE 4: WE MEASURE EVERYTHING...

We measure & track:

- Meters rowed
- Watts generated
- Rigging boats to the millimeter

But stop with the mental side.

COACH ANNOTATION

This slide captures why mental toughness feels so elusive: **lack of specificity and systematic training.**

In rowing, we're obsessed with measurement:

- Split times to the tenth of a second
- Power output in precise watts
- Rigging adjustments to the millimeter
- Stroke rate
- Training volume

But when it comes to mental performance, we:

- Try strategies sporadically
- Don't follow up systematically to see if they're working
- Fall back on character-based language ("be tougher")
- Hope they figure it out

Why this happens: Despite mental toughness being recognized as important, it's not emphasized in coaching certifications or training. Most coaches weren't taught a systematic framework for it.

The shift this keynote provides: You can measure and train mental toughness the same way you measure and train VO₂ max. You just need the right system.

The solution is **NOT**:

- Self-talk
- Motivation
- Positive thinking

The solution **IS**:

Recalibrating the brain and nervous system

SLIDE 5: THE SOLUTION

The solution is **NOT**:

- Self-talk
- Motivation
- Positive thinking

The solution **IS**:

- Recalibrating the brain and nervous system
-

COACH ANNOTATION

Mental toughness is more a biological system than a personality trait. This means we can train it like we train physical fitness, strength, and technique.

What this keynote is NOT about:

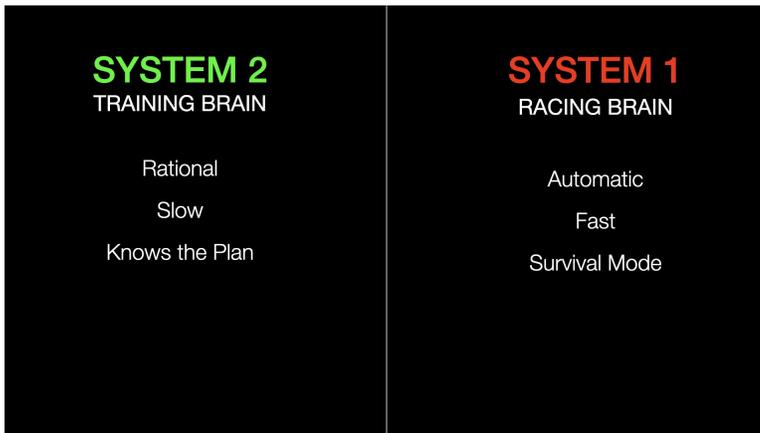
- Traditional sport psychology strategies (self-talk, visualization, positive thinking)
- Motivation or "wanting it more"
- Character development

These strategies aren't bad—they're just not addressing the root problem for athletes who fade consistently.

What this keynote IS about: Exposure-based learning for performance under stress. This is about recalibrating your athlete's nervous system so it can more accurately detect threats, helping them push past discomfort and pain instead of hitting the wall and fading.

The mechanism: When your athlete's brain sends a "STOP" signal at 85% capacity, they can't tell it apart from the "STOP" signal at 100%. Through systematic training, we teach the brain to distinguish between false alarms and actual limits.

Think of it like this: You wouldn't tell an athlete with poor technique to "just row better." You'd systematically train the movement pattern. The same principle applies here.



SLIDE 6: THE TWO SYSTEMS

SYSTEM 2: TRAINING BRAIN

- Rational
- Slow
- Knows the Plan

SYSTEM 1: RACING BRAIN

- Automatic
- Fast
- Survival Mode

COACH ANNOTATION

Understanding these two systems is critical to understanding why your athletes fade.

SYSTEM 2: TRAINING BRAIN

- This is the rational, deliberate part of the brain
- Active during practice when learning technique or discussing race strategy
- Can follow a plan, think logically, make decisions
- Operates when things are manageable

SYSTEM 1: RACING BRAIN

- This is the automatic, fast-acting survival system
- Lives in the amygdala and brain stem
- Main objective: keep you alive
- Takes over under extreme physical or psychological stress
- Doesn't care about race plans, PRs, or gold medals – only survival

Here's the critical problem: Only one system can be in charge at any given time.

Under extreme physical stress (2k, hard race, max erg test), the Training Brain shuts off and the Racing Brain takes over. This is biological, not a choice.

Why this matters for coaching:

- You can't reason with Racing Brain using logic
- Motivation doesn't reach Racing Brain
- "Just be tougher" is speaking to a system that's offline
- You need to train Racing Brain directly through systematic exposure and reflection

The practical implication: This is why athletes can execute perfectly in practice (Training Brain is in charge) but fall apart when intensity and pressure increase (Racing Brain takes over). It's literally a different brain in charge with different priorities.



SLIDE 7: RACING BRAIN DETECTS THREAT

Under intense effort:

- Heart rate ↑
- Breathing ↑
- Stress hormones ↑

Racing Brain: THREAT

COACH ANNOTATION

Here's what happens physiologically during an intense workout, erg test, or race:

1. Heart rate climbs
2. Breathing accelerates
3. Stress hormones (cortisol, adrenaline) surge

This physiological reaction shuts down the Training Brain and activates the Racing Brain.

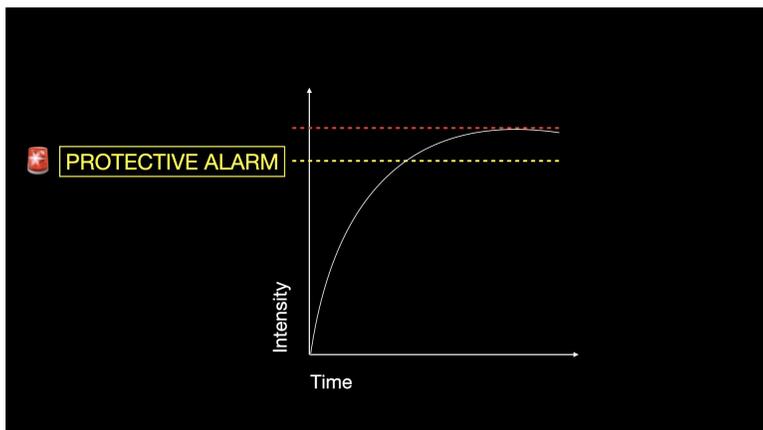
Now here's the key: Racing Brain is biologically programmed to protect you and prevent you from dying. These physiological reactions (high heart rate, labored breathing, burning muscles) can activate the sympathetic nervous system, which usually mean you're in danger, like being chased by a predator.

Racing Brain doesn't know that you voluntarily signed up for this. It doesn't understand that you're doing a 2k test in a controlled environment. All it sees is the physiological data that says "DANGER."

So it does what it's designed to do: **Put your body into fight-or-flight mode and send a very strong STOP signal.**

This is not a suggestion like your Training Brain might give you ("Maybe slow down a bit"). This is a command that will be followed in the moment.

Critical insight for coaches: When your athlete fades, they're not being weak or lacking desire. Their Racing Brain is doing exactly what it's designed to do – protect them from perceived danger. The problem is the threat detection is miscalibrated.



SLIDE 8: THE PROTECTIVE ALARM

Visual: Graph showing intensity over time with alarm going off before actual limit

The Racing Brain sends "STOP" before you reach your physical limit.

COACH ANNOTATION

This is the mechanism that explains why athletes fade at the same point repeatedly.

Key insight: To protect you, Racing Brain sends the "STOP" command BEFORE you reach your actual physical limit. This is biology, happening without conscious choice.

The calibration problem:

An untrained and uncalibrated Racing Brain will sound the alarm with the same urgency at:

- 85% of capacity
- 100% of capacity

Your athlete cannot tell the difference.

Why this happens:

- Racing Brain is conservative—it would rather have you stop too early than risk actual damage
- It's designed for survival, not performance
- Better safe than sorry is its operating principle

The result: Every alarm from Racing Brain is treated like a red light by the body. It stops, slows down, backs off – because Racing Brain is "keeping you safe" and "protecting you from danger."

This is why Sarah didn't have a character flaw. Her brain was operating exactly as designed: Sense threat → Go into fight-or-flight → Protect the body from danger → Stop/slow down.

Coaching implication: When you tell an athlete "you backed off too early," they genuinely don't know that. To them, the 85% alarm felt exactly like impending death. Without training, they can't distinguish false alarm from actual limit.

Your Athlete's Brain:



85% capacity → "I'M DYING"



100% capacity → "I'M DYING"

Same signal. Different reality.

SLIDE 9: YOUR ATHLETE'S BRAIN

85% capacity → "I'M DYING" 100% capacity → "I'M DYING"

Same signal. Different reality.

COACH ANNOTATION

This slide drives home the core problem in stark terms.

Your athlete's experience:

- At 1200m of a 2000m piece, Racing Brain screams "STOP"
- The sensation is overwhelming, terrifying, urgent
- It feels exactly like they're at their absolute limit
- They have no reference point to know they actually have 800m more in them

What makes this worse:

Every time they feel that stop signal and back off, Racing Brain learns: "Good job, I protected them from danger. Next time, let's sound the alarm EARLIER or LOUDER to be even safer."

This is why hard training alone doesn't build mental toughness for athletes like Sarah. Without the right learning process, hard training actually reinforces an overprotective Racing Brain.

Think about it:

- Athlete does hard piece
- Feels "STOP" alarm at 1200m and backs off or struggles
- Racing Brain: "See? That was dangerous. Sound the alarm earlier and louder next time."
- Pattern reinforced

The vicious cycle: More hard training → More false alarms → More backing off → Stronger false alarm system

But there's good news: Systematic training can teach athletes to reinterpret the protective alarm and treat it like a "low fuel" light. It means you're working hard, but you still have capacity before you're empty.

The goal: Calibrate Racing Brain so it can distinguish between 85% (uncomfortable but manageable) and 100% (actual limit).



SLIDE 10: THREE LIES - WHAT'S KEEPING YOUR ROWERS STUCK

Most of what you've been taught about mental toughness is not just wrong—it's actively making your athletes worse.

COACH ANNOTATION

Before showing you the solution, you need to understand what doesn't work—and why you might resist implementing the right strategies.

There are three common beliefs about mental toughness that:

1. Keep your athletes stuck
2. Make you feel like you're already doing enough
3. Will tempt you to dismiss the system I'm about to show you

These aren't just unhelpful beliefs—they're actively harmful because they prevent you from implementing systematic training.

Why this matters: If you believe any of these three lies, you'll either:

- Not implement this system ("My athletes just need to be tougher")
- Implement it half-heartedly ("I'll try this, but hard training should be enough")
- Give up too early ("See, it doesn't work for my athletes")

Let's address each one so you can recognize them when they show up.



LIE #1

Mental toughness is a personality trait

SLIDE 11: LIE #1 - MENTAL TOUGHNESS IS A PERSONALITY TRAIT

"Some athletes just have it, others don't."

COACH ANNOTATION

The lie: Mental toughness is a fixed personality trait—either you're born with it or you're not.

Why coaches believe this:

- We see some athletes naturally handle pressure better
- We've always heard about "grit" and "heart" as innate qualities
- It's easier to select for toughness than to develop it

What happens when you believe this:

- You stop coaching and start sorting
- You select for toughness instead of developing it
- You label athletes early ("Sarah just doesn't have it")
- You quietly write off the Sarahs of the world

What happens to athletes who believe this:

- They think they "just don't have it"
- They compare themselves to others in unhealthy ways
- They get discouraged
- They eventually quit

THE TRUTH: Mental toughness is not a personality trait. It's a biological capacity that can be trained like VO₂ max, strength, or technique.

What's actually happening with "mentally weak" athletes:

They don't lack something innate. They have a Racing Brain that's been trained—unintentionally—to back off immediately when discomfort hits, before they're physically incapable of continuing.

That's not who they are as a person. That's what their nervous system has learned. And learned systems can be retrained.

Why this lie is dangerous:

- It makes you think Sarah can't be helped
- It prevents you from implementing systematic training
- It creates a fixed mindset in athletes who need growth mindset most

How to recognize this lie in your thinking:

- "Some rowers just have it, others don't"
- "She's not a natural competitor"
- "He doesn't have the killer instinct"
- "Mental toughness isn't coachable"

If you believe this lie, you'll never implement the system because you'll think it won't work for your faders.

LIE #1

Mental toughness is a personality trait

LIE #2

Hard training automatically builds mental toughness

SLIDE 12: LIE #2 - HARD TRAINING AUTOMATICALLY BUILDS MENTAL TOUGHNESS

"My athletes do plenty of hard pieces—they should be tough by now."

COACH ANNOTATION

The lie: If you just make training hard enough, mental toughness will automatically develop.

Why coaches believe this:

- "No pain, no gain" is deeply embedded in athletic culture
- We've seen some athletes get tougher through hard training
- It's what we've always done

The reality check:

Your athletes do thousands of high-intensity strokes. Many are still fading at the same point, still not reaching their potential, still backing off when it counts.

Why volume alone doesn't work:

Without the right systematic training for Racing Brain, hard training can backfire and make things worse for struggling athletes.

Here's what's actually happening:

1. Athlete does hard piece
2. Racing Brain sounds alarm at 1200m
3. Athlete backs off or struggles through
4. Racing Brain: "Good, I protected them. Sound alarm earlier next time."
5. Repeat
6. Racing Brain becomes MORE overprotective, not less

You think you're building toughness. You're actually training overprotection.

Why this lie is dangerous:

- It makes you think you're already doing enough
- It prevents you from adding the systematic reflection component
- It explains why some athletes get tougher (they're naturally reflecting/learning) and others don't (no systematic learning process)

How to recognize this lie in your thinking:

- "We do plenty of hard pieces"
- "They should be tough by now"
- "More volume will fix it"
- "They just need to suffer more"

The missing piece isn't more suffering—it's systematic reflection that teaches Racing Brain to update its threat detection. Without that reflection, you're just reinforcing the overprotective alarm system.

LIE #1

Mental toughness is a personality trait

LIE #2

Hard training automatically builds mental toughness

LIE #3

If they wanted it badly enough, they'd push harder

SLIDE 13: LIE #3 - IF THEY WANTED IT BADLY ENOUGH, THEY'D PUSH HARDER

"Winners don't quit. They just need to want it more."

COACH ANNOTATION

The lie: Athletes who fade lack desire, motivation, or character. If they really wanted it, they'd push through.

This is character-based coaching:

- "Winners don't quit"
- "You're mentally weak"
- "You just need to want it more"

What this language does: Triggers shame, not change.

The reality check question:

Do you have athletes who:

- Work incredibly hard in practice
- Desperately want to succeed
- Feel awful when they fade
- ...and still fade anyway?

Of course you do.

So it's clearly not a motivation problem or character problem. It's a training problem.

What's actually happening:

These athletes want it just as badly as your top performers. But their Racing Brain has learned that the intensity at 1200m equals danger. Wanting it more doesn't override a biological threat response.

Think about it: Can you "want it more" to not feel pain when you touch a hot stove? No—it's an automatic protective response. Same principle here.

Why this lie is dangerous:

- It makes you blame character instead of training the system
- It makes you think faders lack heart or desire
- It leads you to use shaming language that makes the problem worse
- It prevents systematic intervention because "they just need to care more"

How to recognize this lie in your thinking:

- "She just doesn't want it enough"
- "He's not willing to suffer"
- "Some athletes are just soft"
- "They need to dig deeper"

The truth: For most faders, it's not about wanting it more. It's about training their nervous system to accurately detect when they're at 85% vs. 100%. That's a skills problem, not a character problem.

Coaching shift: When you stop blaming character and start training the system, you'll see athletes transform. Not because they suddenly "wanted it more," but because their Racing Brain learned to distinguish false alarms from actual limits.



SLIDE 14: THE CALIBRATION AUDIT - MAKING MENTAL TOUGHNESS SYSTEMATIC

Now that you know what NOT to do, here's what DOES work.

COACH ANNOTATION

The Calibration Audit is the systematic protocol for training mental toughness.

Core principle: Racing Brain updates itself through prediction error.

How it works:

1. Racing Brain predicts: "This intensity = danger"
2. Reality: Athlete survives and finishes
3. New data logged
4. Repeat 15-20 times
5. Racing Brain recalibrates its alarm threshold

Why this works:

Racing Brain learns through pattern recognition, not logic or motivation. When it consistently predicts danger and you consistently survive, it updates its threat detection model.

The catch: One success isn't enough. Racing Brain can dismiss a single success as a fluke. You need 15-20 exposures minimum to create reliable change and recalibration.

Timeline expectations:

- This is not instant
- Not over and done in 2-3 pieces
- Your athletes have been training Racing Brain for YEARS to be overprotective
- It takes many counterexamples over a longer period to update the pattern

Think of it like strength training:

- One week of squats won't noticeably increase strength
- But 3-4 months of systematic weight training will produce measurable gains

Brain training works the same way, on the same timeline.

What makes this different from just "doing hard pieces":

The systematic reflection component. Without conscious processing of the prediction error, Racing Brain files the experience as "yeah, we survived, but it was still dangerous." With systematic reflection, you force explicit learning that physically rewires the brain.



SLIDE 15: CASE STUDY - MIKE

6.2-Second PR | 16 Pieces Over 12 Weeks

The athlete:

- College rower
- Strong and fast, but conservative during erg tests
- Unsure of himself during races
- Stuck at 6:32 on his 2k, wanted to break 6:30
- Had the fitness (only 2 seconds off goal)
- Racing Brain had learned: "Race pace = threat. You can't hold it. Slow down."

COACH ANNOTATION

Mike's case demonstrates what Racing Brain recalibration looks like in practice.

The barrier: Not physical capacity (he had the fitness). Not desire (he desperately wanted to break 6:30). It was a miscalibrated threat detection system that never trusted he could push through the final 500m.

The intervention:

We didn't focus on confidence or positive thinking. We worked on making Racing Brain's threat detection more accurate.

The process:

When Racing Brain told him he couldn't hold race pace after the first 500m, he:

1. Committed to the pace anyway
2. Refocused attention on external cues (technique, boat, splits)
3. Broke the piece into 10-stroke chunks
4. Pushed through while fight-or-flight was fully activated
5. Finished the piece and held his splits

Then came the critical step: **Systematic reflection using the recalibration questions**

- Where did the alarm go off?
- Where did I actually finish?
- What does that gap prove?

This identified the prediction error: Racing Brain said "can't hold it" → He held it → Proof that Racing Brain's prediction was wrong.

The timeline: 15-16 pieces over 3 months

The result: Racing Brain stopped sending catastrophic threat signals. Not because of willpower or "wanting it more," but because of systematic recording and reflection.

Final outcome: 6:27.5 (6.2-second PR, smashing through the 6:30 barrier)

Bonus application: Mike later used the same protocol for test anxiety in organic chemistry. This makes sense—test anxiety affects the brain similarly (psychological stress triggers fight-or-flight, Training Brain goes offline, mind "goes blank"). Same system, same solution.

Key coaching takeaway: This change didn't come from motivation, confidence work, or character development. It came from systematically training the nervous system through exposure and reflection.

THE CALIBRATION AUDIT

Q1 THE ALARM

Q2 THE TRUTH

Q3 THE EVIDENCE

SLIDE 16: THE CALIBRATION AUDIT - THE 3 QUESTIONS

Q1: THE ALARM

Q2: THE TRUTH

Q3: THE EVIDENCE

COACH ANNOTATION

The Calibration Audit is simple but powerful when done correctly. The athlete answers three specific questions after every hard workout.

The structure:

1. **Question 1** forces awareness of Racing Brain's threat alarm (the prediction)
2. **Question 2** creates reality check by comparing actual result to prediction
3. **Question 3** forces learning through systematic reflection

The exact wording and sequence matters. These questions are specifically designed to:

- Make implicit learning explicit
- Force conscious processing of prediction errors
- Create measurable data the athlete can reference

Each question serves a distinct neurological purpose:

- Q1: Notice the prediction
- Q2: Notice the reality
- Q3: State the conflict

Without all three, the learning is incomplete.

Implementation: After every hard piece, athletes take 90 seconds to answer these questions. That's the entire intervention.

THE CALIBRATION AUDIT

THE ALARM

Where did the alarm go off?

THE TRUTH

THE EVIDENCE

SLIDE 17: QUESTION 1 - THE ALARM

"Where did your Racing Brain tell you to back off?"

COACH ANNOTATION

This question creates awareness of Racing Brain's threat alarm, the prediction of threat.

What you're teaching: Athletes need to identify the exact moment Racing Brain sent the stop signal.

Specificity matters:

This is NOT:

- "How did you feel?"
- "Was it hard?"
- "Did you struggle?"

This IS:

- Where (specific distance/time)
- What sensation
- What the alarm said

GOOD example: "At 1200 meters, legs were burning, and my brain said 'I can't hold this split any longer.'"

BAD example: "My brain told me to stop during the hard part."

Why specificity matters:

Just like you're specific about splits to the tenth of a second and weights to the exact pound, you need to be specific about where the alarm went off.

Vague answers let Racing Brain dismiss the experience. Specific answers create data that can be analyzed and learned from.

Coaching tip: In the first week, most athletes will write vague answers. That's normal. Keep reinforcing: "Be specific. Where EXACTLY did the alarm go off?"

What this question does neurologically:

Forces the athlete to consciously notice and name the automatic process. "Notice it, name it" is a fundamental principle of changing automatic responses. You can't change what you're not aware of.

THE CALIBRATION AUDIT

THE ALARM

Where did the alarm go off?

THE TRUTH

When did you stop?

THE EVIDENCE

SLIDE 18: QUESTION 2 - THE TRUTH

"Where did you actually stop?"

COACH ANNOTATION

This question creates the reality check. Simple. Factual. No judgment.

What you're looking for:

Objective facts about what actually happened:

- "Completed full 2000m at target split"
- "Finished at 2000m but split slipped to 1:54 in final 200m"
- "Backed off at 1650m"

The purpose: Create a second data point that can be compared to the first.

Now the athlete has written down:

- **Prediction:** "Brain said stop at 1200m"
- **Reality:** "Actually finished at 2000m"

Or if they didn't make it to their goal:

- **Prediction:** "Brain said stop at 1200m"
- **Reality:** "Made it to 1650m before backing off"

Even if they didn't finish as planned, there's usually a gap between when the alarm went off and when they actually stopped. That gap is the learning opportunity.

Why writing matters:

When they see the gap in their own handwriting between what Racing Brain predicted and what they actually accomplished, it sets the stage for recalibration.

This isn't you telling them they could do more. This is them seeing objective proof in their own data.

Coaching tip: Keep this question purely factual. No judgment on whether they "should have" finished or "could have" gone farther. Just the facts of what happened.

THE CALIBRATION AUDIT

THE ALARM

Where did the alarm go off?

THE TRUTH

When did you stop?

THE EVIDENCE

What does the gap prove about my capacity?

SLIDE 19: QUESTION 3 - THE EVIDENCE

"What does that gap prove about your capacity?"

COACH ANNOTATION

This is the learning question. It locks in the recalibration process.

What you're forcing: The athlete to consciously state the conflict between prediction and reality.

GOOD example: "My Racing Brain was wrong. I had 800 more meters in me when it said to stop. The stop signal was a false alarm."

Why this third question matters:

Questions 1 and 2 give you data. Question 3 forces processing of that data.

Without this reflection, Racing Brain just has raw experience: "We survived, but it was still terrible and dangerous."

With this reflection, Racing Brain has to acknowledge: "My prediction was inaccurate. The threat level I perceived didn't match reality."

The mechanism:

When you force your brain to acknowledge a prediction error OUT LOUD or in writing, you activate different neural pathways than just experiencing it.

You're making implicit learning explicit. This physically rewires how neurons fire.

It's the same reason you keep training logs:

Athletes could just show up and train. But when they WRITE DOWN their splits, the brain processes it differently. The act of recording reinforces learning.

Common pushback: "How does writing three sentences change the brain? That seems too simple."

Answer: Racing Brain learns through pattern recognition, not logic. If athletes don't consciously PROCESS the experience, Racing Brain files it away as "dangerous" even though they survived. The three questions force conscious processing that creates explicit learning and neurological change.

This isn't magic. It's applied neuroscience.

The hard part isn't understanding it. Rather, it's doing it consistently for 15-20 pieces.

Current

- Athletes finish piece
- Rack oars
- Grab water
- Coach says "good job"
- Everyone goes home

New

- Athletes finish piece
- Rack oars
- Grab water
- Fill out 3-question audit (90 seconds)
- Coach collects logs



The image shows a 'Daily Evidence Log' form on a clipboard. The form is titled 'Daily Evidence Log' and includes a date field 'Date: 04/26/2022'. It has two columns: 'Evidence' and 'Next Steps'. The 'Evidence' column contains three numbered items: '1. Found an athlete during...', '2. Found an athlete during...', and '3. Found an athlete during...'. The 'Next Steps' column contains three numbered items: '4. Ask: "Do you feel good?"', '5. Ask: "Do you feel good?"', and '6. Ask: "Do you feel good?"'. Below the columns are several empty rows for additional entries.

SLIDE 20: IMPLEMENTATION - CURRENT VS NEW

CURRENT:

1. Athletes finish piece
2. Rack oars
3. Grab water
4. Coach says "good job"
5. Everyone goes home

NEW:

1. Athletes finish piece
2. Rack oars
3. Grab water
4. **Fill out 3-question audit (90 seconds)**
5. Coach collects logs
6. Everyone goes home

COACH ANNOTATION

This slide addresses the biggest practical objection: "I don't have time for another thing."

The reality: You're already doing the workout. The piece is happening anyway—that's the time-consuming part. Athletes are already pushing themselves through pain and discomfort.

What changes: The last 90 seconds of practice.

Current process doesn't change Racing Brain.

When you just say "good job" and send everyone home, it confirms or reinforces whatever Racing Brain already thought:

- If they backed off: "See, it was dangerous"
- If they pushed through: "We survived, but it was still dangerous"

No learning happens.

New process creates systematic learning:

The 90 seconds of reflection is what makes all that suffering productive. Without it, athletes are just confirming that discomfort should be avoided.

Coach's role:

You don't need to review every log in detail. You're looking for patterns:

- Same athlete writing "Brain said stop at 1200m" repeatedly → Pattern identified, threshold known
- Same athlete writing "Brain said stop at 1200m but I finished at 2000m" repeatedly → Recalibration happening

Time investment: 2 minutes longer than practice currently takes.

What you get: A systematic protocol that turns struggling athletes into mentally tough ones.

This isn't about adding more to your plate. It's about making the hard pieces you're already doing more effective.

This is coddling.

Make Rowing Easier



Make Practice Productive



SLIDE 21: THIS IS NOT CODDLING

WRONG: Make Rowing Easier

RIGHT: Make Suffering Productive

COACH ANNOTATION

Anticipated objection: "This sounds like coddling. Rowing is supposed to be hard."

Let's be crystal clear:

I'm NOT suggesting you make practices easier.

I'm NOT suggesting you reduce intensity or volume.

I'm NOT suggesting you baby athletes.

What I AM suggesting:

Help athletes who are struggling with mental toughness in the same way you help athletes who need to get stronger—with a simple, systematic protocol.

The Calibration Audit doesn't eliminate the hard out of rowing.

The suffering is still there. The discomfort is still there. The pain is still there.

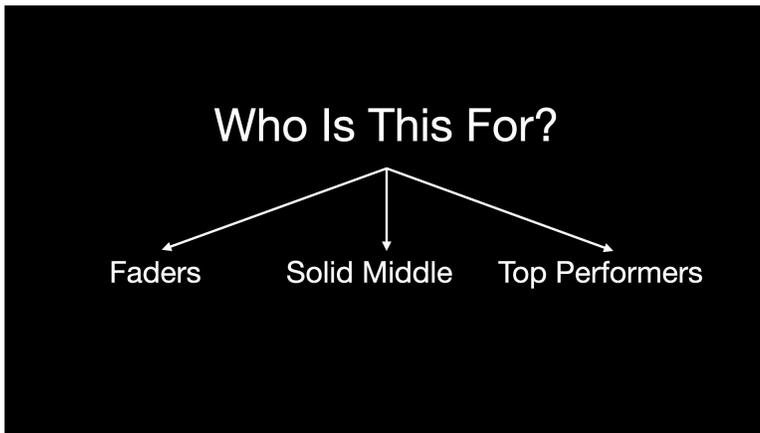
What changes: How athletes process and learn from that suffering.

Without systematic reflection:

- Athletes experience suffering
- Racing Brain: "That was dangerous, avoid next time"
- Overprotection reinforced

With systematic reflection:

- Athletes experience suffering
- Reflect on prediction vs. reality
- Racing Brain: "I survived, my prediction was wrong, update threat detection"



SLIDE 22: WHO IS THIS FOR?

FADERS • SOLID MIDDLE • TOP PERFORMERS

COACH ANNOTATION

Common questions:

1. "Is this just for my struggling athletes like Sarah?"
2. "Won't my tough rowers think this is beneath them?"

Answer: Implement team-wide, but frame it differently for different athletes.

FOR FADERS (like Sarah):

Frame it: "Your Racing Brain has been trained to sound the alarm too early. We're going to recalibrate it so you can access your full capacity."

What they need to hear:

- This is a training problem, not a character flaw
- Their nervous system learned the wrong pattern
- They can systematically retrain it
- 15-20 pieces with reflection = recalibration

Why they benefit most: Biggest gap between alarm and actual capacity. Most to gain from recalibration.

FOR SOLID MIDDLE (consistent but not dominant):

Frame it: "You're executing well, but there's likely a gap between your alarm and your actual limit. Let's find out how much more you have."

What they need to hear:

- Even if they're not "fading," they may have untapped capacity
- Systematic reflection reveals hidden gaps
- They could be performing at 90% when they have 100%

Why they benefit: Often discover a 5-10% gap they didn't know existed. Performance gains come from accessing that hidden capacity.

FOR TOP PERFORMERS (already mentally tough):

Frame it: "You're already doing this unconsciously. This makes it systematic so you can push your ceiling even higher."

What they need to hear:

- They're naturally good at distinguishing alarms from limits
- Making it systematic refines an existing skill
- Even they have gaps to discover
- Performance optimization for elite athletes

Why they benefit:

- Discover gaps they thought didn't exist
- Make unconscious competence conscious and therefore trainable
- Push beyond perceived limits

WHY TEAM-WIDE IMPLEMENTATION IS SMART:

1. Prevents singling anyone out. Sarah doesn't feel like she's in "remedial mental toughness class." Everyone does it together.

2. Even top rowers benefit. In my experience, top performers are often the MOST excited because they thought they were maxed out. Discovering hidden capacity is thrilling for them.

3. Creates shared language. When everyone talks about Racing Brain alarms, prediction errors, and recalibration, it normalizes the work. Creates team culture around mental training.

4. Peer influence helps buy-in. When top rowers take it seriously, struggling athletes follow. Your best athletes doing this helps your faders believe in it.

5. Coaches can track team-wide patterns. You'll see which athletes have naturally tight calibration (top performers) and which have big gaps (faders). Gives you diagnostic data.

Implementation tip: Make it mandatory for everyone, but let the framing adjust based on starting point. Same system, different entry point based on current performance level.

The framework can help you move past mental blocks, especially around 2ks.

- Liliana, Division I Rower

Dr. Schary helped improve my performance by simplifying my thinking, and reflecting on what I can actually do.

- Ryan, High School Rower

Dr. Schary really helped me do well on my 2k. It gave me a way to break it down and not stress so much over it. The framework helped me realize my worries didn't need so much precedence in my mind.

- Layla, High School Rower

It helped me describe the mental shift from practice to race day and better support my rowers in those environments... and it added insight especially for coxswains into what's actually going on in the rowers' brains.

- Gracie, High School Coxswain

SLIDE 23: REAL RESULTS - TESTIMONIALS

Gracie, High School Coxswain: "It helped me describe the mental shift from practice to race day and better support my rowers in those environments."

Liliana, Division I Rower: "The framework can help you move past mental blocks, especially around 2ks."

Layla, High School Rower: "Dr. Schary really helped me do well on my 2k. It gave me a way to break it down and not stress so much over it."

Ryan, High School Rower: "Dr. Schary helped improve my performance by simplifying my thinking, and reflecting on what I can actually do."

COACH ANNOTATION

Notice what these testimonials are NOT saying:

- "I feel more confident"
- "I'm more motivated"
- "I have better self-talk"

What they ARE saying:

- "It helped me DO something I couldn't do before"
- "I moved past mental blocks"
- "I improved my performance"

That's the difference.

This isn't about feeling better or thinking differently. It's about performing better through systematic training of the nervous system.

When implemented consistently over time:

- Faders stop fading
- Solid middle performers discover hidden capacity
- Top performers push their ceiling higher

If it doesn't work for a specific athlete, that usually means:

- They need more time (haven't hit 15-20 pieces yet)
- They're not implementing correctly (vague reflection, skipping pieces)
- They need additional support (sport psych, physical capacity issues, overtraining)

But the system works when implemented correctly.

These testimonials represent hundreds of athletes who have gone through this protocol. The pattern is consistent: systematic reflection creates measurable performance improvement.



SLIDE 24: INTERACTION - THINK OF A ROWER

WHERE DO THEY TYPICALLY FADE?

COACH ANNOTATION

[This is an interactive slide for live presentations]

When presenting this to your team or other coaches, this is where you pause and have them think about specific athletes.

For your own implementation:

Take 2 minutes right now and think about one rower who consistently fades or struggles to reach potential.

Questions to consider:

1. Where do they typically fade? (Be specific: 1200m? Final 500m? Third 500m?)
2. What do you think their Racing Brain is predicting at that moment?
3. What threat is it detecting?

What you'll likely notice:

They fade at the SAME POINT every time. Not random fatigue. Not variable based on conditions. The same spot, predictably.

What this tells you: That's Racing Brain's learned threat-detection threshold.

Why this matters: If it's learned, it's trainable.

What coaches typically discover in this exercise:

- "My athlete ALWAYS fades at 1200m"
- "They look panicked right before the third 500m"

- "Every race, final 500m, like clockwork"
- "First 1000m great, then it falls apart"

The pattern confirms it's not random. It's a miscalibrated Racing Brain alarm going off at the same threshold repeatedly.

Coaching implication:

Once you identify the pattern, you can:

1. Name it for the athlete
2. Predict when it will happen
3. Help them prepare for it
4. Use systematic reflection to recalibrate it

Next Monday: When you know your athlete will hit their alarm at 1200m, you can frame before the piece: "Your Racing Brain will sound the alarm around 1200m. That's expected. Notice it, name it, take the next stroke."

This shifts from "don't give up" to "here comes the predictable false alarm, we know what to do with it."



SLIDE 25: WHAT CHANGES IN YOUR COACHING

Your thinking changes → Your language changes

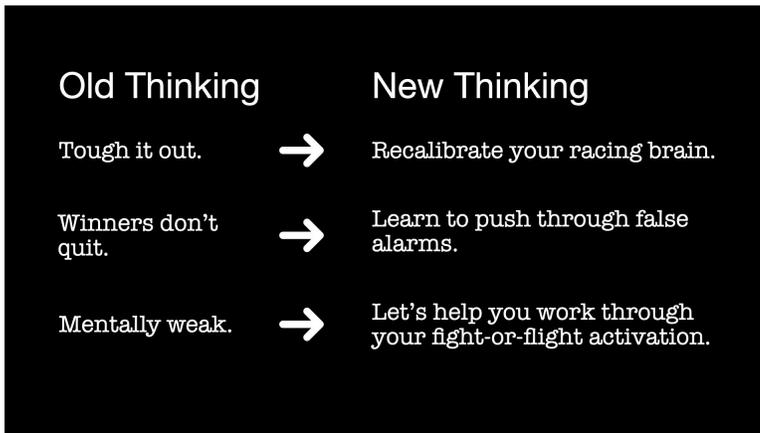
COACH ANNOTATION

When you understand the neuroscience, everything about your coaching approach shifts.

What changes:

1. Language
2. Feedback
3. Post-practice debriefs
4. Pre-piece framing
5. Race-day calls (for coxswains)
6. How you think about "mentally weak" athletes

Let's break down each change...



SLIDE 26: LANGUAGE SHIFT

OLD THINKING:

- "Tough it out"
- "Winners don't quit"
- "Mentally weak"

NEW THINKING:

- "Recalibrate your Racing Brain"
- "Learn to push through false alarms"
- "Let's help you work through fight-or-flight activation"

COACH ANNOTATION

This language shift is critical because it changes how athletes internalize their struggles.

OLD LANGUAGE (Character-Based):

- "You need to be tougher"
- "Winners don't quit"
- "You're mentally weak"
- "Just want it more"
- "Dig deeper"

Why it doesn't work: Triggers shame, activates fixed mindset, makes athletes think something is fundamentally wrong with WHO THEY ARE.

NEW LANGUAGE (Skills-Based):

- "Your Racing Brain is still calibrating its threat detection"
- "You're learning to distinguish false alarms from actual limits"
- "Let's help you work through your fight-or-flight activation"

- "This is neurological recalibration, not a character flaw"
- "You're training your nervous system"

Why it works: Creates growth mindset, removes shame, makes it clear this is TRAINABLE, focuses on the system not the person.

The impact on your team:

Character-based language:

- Triggers shame
- Creates fixed mindset
- Makes struggling athletes feel broken
- Leads to burnout and quitting

Skills-based language:

- Creates learning environment
- Develops growth mindset
- Makes struggling athletes feel supported
- Creates resilient, mentally tough athletes who love the sport

Practical implementation:

Catch yourself when you're about to say something character-based. Pause. Reframe with skills-based language.

Example:

- Impulse: "You need to be tougher"
- Reframe: "Your Racing Brain is learning. We're 8 pieces into recalibration."

Example:

- Impulse: "Why did you give up?"
- Reframe: "Where did your Racing Brain tell you to stop? Let's look at the gap."

This isn't just semantics. Language shapes how athletes think about themselves and their capacity to change.

Feedback Shift

Less Effective	Character/Feeling (Vague, dismissible)	"Great job today! You looked really tough out the last 500m."
More Effective	Data/Action (Objective, specific)	"You maintained a 1:52 split for the final 500m, even when your form started to break."
Most Effective	Mechanism/ Calibration (Updates System 2)	"Two weeks ago, you backed off during the last 500m. Today, you felt the signal and held the split anyway. You're recalibrating your brain."

SLIDE 27: FEEDBACK SHIFT

LEVEL 1: Character/Feeling (Vague, dismissible) "Great job today! You looked really tough out the last 500m."

LEVEL 2: Data/Action (Objective, specific) "You maintained a 1:52 split for the final 500m, even when your form started to break."

LEVEL 3: Mechanism/Calibration (Updates the system) "Two weeks ago, you backed off during the last 500m. Today, you felt the signal and held the split anyway. You're recalibrating your brain."

COACH ANNOTATION

The way you give feedback directly impacts how quickly Racing Brain recalibrates.

LEVEL 1: CHARACTER/FEELING FEEDBACK

Examples:

- "Great job, you looked tough!"
- "You really pushed it today!"
- "I'm proud of how hard you worked!"

Why it's less effective:

If the athlete's internal narrative is "I wanted to quit the whole time" or "I felt like I was dying," your positive feedback feels like a lie. Racing Brain rejects it.

It's not that compliments are bad, they're just not doing the neurological work needed for recalibration.

LEVEL 2: DATA/ACTION FEEDBACK

Examples:

- "You held 1:52 through the final 500m"
- "Your stroke rate stayed consistent even when breathing got hard"
- "You maintained form through the third 500m"

Why it's better:

Provides objective facts rather than subjective interpretation. Helps athletes accurately assess their performance against Racing Brain's predictions.

This is good feedback. But you can go one level deeper...

LEVEL 3: MECHANISM/CALIBRATION FEEDBACK

Examples:

- "Two weeks ago you backed off at 1200m. Today you felt the signal and held it. Your Racing Brain is learning."
- "You felt the urge to stop at 1500m and executed anyway. That proves the Racing Brain's signal was inaccurate."
- "Last month that intensity triggered backing off. Today you pushed through. That's measurable recalibration."

Why it's most effective:

Connects the data to the mechanism. Forces athlete (and Racing Brain) to recognize that capacity is changing.

This specific feedback accelerates recalibration because it:

1. Acknowledges the alarm (validates their experience)
2. Points out the execution (objective data)
3. Names the mechanism (Racing Brain learning)
4. Reinforces that change is happening

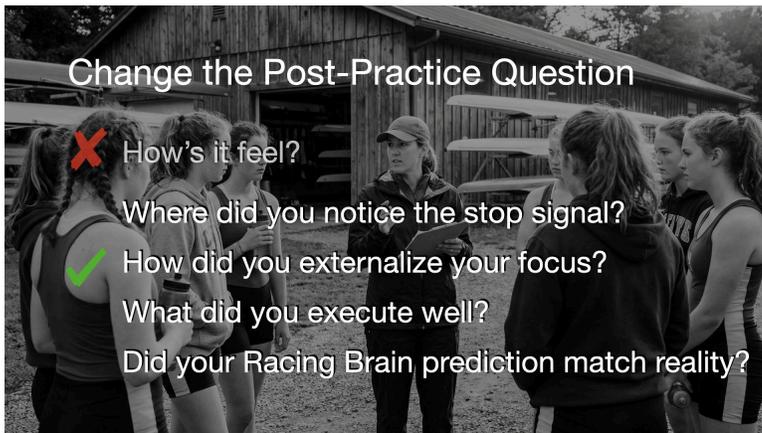
Practical implementation:

You don't need to always give Level 3 feedback. But when you see clear examples of athletes pushing through their typical fade point, name it explicitly.

Keep brief reference notes on where athletes typically fade. When you see them push through that point, give mechanism-based feedback.

"Sarah usually backs off at 1200m. Today she held it to 1800m. That's recalibration happening."

This helps athletes (and their Racing Brains) recognize that measurable change is occurring.



SLIDE 28: POST-PRACTICE DEBRIEF

OLD: "How's it feel?"

NEW:

- "Where did you notice the stop signal?"
- "How did you externalize your focus?"
- "What did you execute well?"
- "Did your Racing Brain prediction match reality?"

COACH ANNOTATION

The questions you ask after practice directly influence what athletes learn from the experience.

WHY "HOW'D IT FEEL?" DOESN'T WORK:

Feelings are linked to System 2 (Training Brain). But we're trying to train System 1 (Racing Brain).

"It felt terrible" doesn't provide useful data for recalibration. It just confirms Racing Brain was right to sound the alarm.

NEW QUESTIONS CREATE SYSTEMATIC LEARNING:

"Where did you notice the stop signal?"

- Forces awareness of Racing Brain's alarm
- Teaches pattern recognition
- Creates data for tracking fade points

"How did you externalize your focus?"

- Reinforces attention management strategies
- Teaches what worked to push through

- Builds toolkit of coping mechanisms

"What did you execute well?"

- Focuses on actions, not feelings
- Builds evidence of capability
- Shifts from "how I felt" to "what I did"

"Did your Racing Brain prediction match reality?"

- Direct assessment of prediction error
- Forces conscious processing
- Reinforces recalibration learning

Implementation:

You don't need to ask all four questions every time. But replacing "how'd it feel?" with ANY of these questions shifts the learning dynamic.

The pattern you're building:

Instead of athletes leaving practice thinking "that was hard" (which Racing Brain interprets as dangerous), they leave thinking "my alarm went off at 1200m but I finished at 2000m" (which Racing Brain must process as prediction error).

These questions reinforce the recalibration loop every single practice.

The debriefs become productive guided reflection that helps athletes think about and process practices correctly.



SLIDE 29: WHAT IF YOU DON'T IMPLEMENT?

If you walk out and don't implement anything:

- Your rowers will get fitter, stronger, technically better
 - But then erg tests come, seat racing, regattas
 - Sarah will fade at the same spot she always fades
 - She'll apologize to teammates, feel devastated
 - You'll say "You'll get it next time. Just dig deeper."
 - Her Racing Brain learns: "I was right. That was dangerous. Stop earlier next time."
 - Eventually she quits rowing
-

COACH ANNOTATION

This is the sobering reality of maintaining the status quo.

What happens without systematic intervention:

Athletes continue the pattern they've always had:

1. Physical preparation happens (they get fitter, stronger)
2. High-pressure moment arrives (erg test, race, championship)
3. Racing Brain takes over
4. Alarm sounds at same point it always has
5. Athlete fades or backs off
6. Frustration, disappointment, shame
7. Well-meaning coach says "dig deeper" or "you'll get it next time"
8. Racing Brain reinforces: "See, that intensity IS dangerous"
9. Pattern strengthened
10. Repeat

The long-term consequence:

Eventually—maybe not this season, maybe not next year—athletes like Sarah quit rowing.

Not because they weren't good enough.

Not because they weren't tough enough.

But because nobody ever taught their Racing Brain that they could push through and thrive.

What you lose:

- Potential that never gets realized
- Athletes who fall out of love with the sport
- The satisfaction of seeing transformation
- Team culture where struggle = failure instead of struggle = growth

This is the cost of hoping mental toughness just develops on its own.



SLIDE 30: WHAT IF YOU DO IMPLEMENT?

If you DO implement this:

- You teach her the stop signal is data, not a command
- You give her 15-20 pieces of evidence that her brain's threat detection is inaccurate
- You show her how to externalize focus and push through discomfort
- She discovers she's capable of more than she ever believed
- One day, in that final 500m, the alarm goes off
- But she knows she has more to give
- She takes one more stroke. And another. And another.
- She crosses the finish line and realizes: "I just did something I never thought I could do"

That's not just a faster 2k time.

That's a human being learning they're capable of hard things.

That's a skill they'll use for the rest of their life.

COACH ANNOTATION

This is the transformation that's possible with systematic training.

What changes for the athlete:

Mindset:

- From "I can't" → "My Racing Brain says I can't, but the data proves otherwise"
- From shame → learning
- From fixed → growth

Performance:

- Faders stop fading
- PRs that seemed impossible become achievable
- Consistency under pressure develops

- Race-day performance matches training performance

Self-concept:

- "I'm not mentally weak, I was just undertrained in this system"
- "I can learn to handle discomfort"
- "I'm capable of hard things"

Beyond rowing:

This skill transfers to everything:

- Academic pressure
- Test anxiety
- Job interviews
- Difficult conversations
- Life challenges

When athletes learn their brain's threat predictions can be inaccurate and they can systematically retrain those predictions, they gain a meta-skill for navigating all high-pressure situations.

What changes for you as a coach:

- Instead of hoping athletes are tough enough, you systematically build it
- Instead of sorting athletes into "tough" and "not tough," you develop everyone
- Instead of character-based coaching that triggers shame, you use skills-based language that creates growth
- Instead of watching potential go unrealized, you see transformation

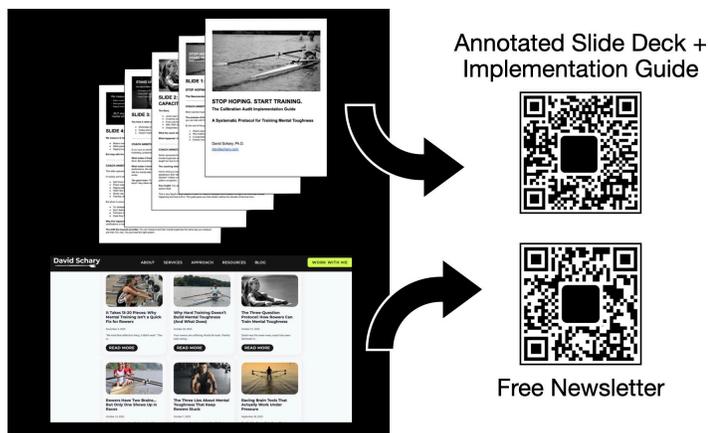
The moment that makes it worth it:

When that athlete crosses the finish line – win or lose, PR or not – and realizes "I just did something I never thought I could do."

That moment changes everything. Not just their rowing. Their whole understanding of what they're capable of.

That's what systematic training of mental toughness creates.

SLIDE 31: GET THE COMPLETE GUIDE



Annotated Slide Deck + Implementation Guide

Complete Guide: davidschary.com/train-the-brain

Free Newsletter: davidschary.com/blog

COACH ANNOTATION

What You're Downloading

When you visit davidschary.com/train-the-brain, you'll be able to download this complete annotated keynote guide – everything from this presentation plus detailed implementation notes and resources.

What's included:

1. Complete Slide Deck with Coach Annotations

- Every slide from this presentation
- Detailed explanations of each concept
- Why it matters for your coaching
- How to implement it with your athletes
- Common questions answered

2. 4-Week Implementation Roadmap

- Simple Week-by-week action plan
- What to do, what to expect, how to respond
- Success metrics for each week
- Troubleshooting for common challenges

3. Language Scripts

- Before-piece framing
- During-piece coxswain calls
- After-piece reflection prompts
- Responses when athletes fade again
- How to handle resistance

4. Evidence Log Template

- Printable weekly tracker for athletes
- 6 days of practice entries
- Built-in reflection prompts
- Weekly review section
- Ready to print and distribute

5. Troubleshooting Guide

- "This isn't working for me" → What to check
- Athletes who resist reflection → What to say
- Performance not improving → What to assess
- Physical vs mental issues → How to distinguish

6. Success Metrics

- What to look for after 15-20 pieces
 - Signs recalibration is happening
 - Team-wide patterns to track
 - When to adjust your approach
-

How to Use This Guide

Tonight/This Weekend:

1. Read the first 10 slides (pages 1-20) to understand the core framework
2. Focus on the two-system brain model and the 3 questions
3. Print the evidence log template (at the end of this guide)
4. That's it for now

Monday:

- After your first hard piece, hand out evidence logs
- Walk athletes through the 3 questions (takes 5 minutes)
- Collect logs and skim for patterns
- Done

Week 1-4:

- Follow the week-by-week roadmap in this guide
- Reference the language scripts when you need them
- Use the troubleshooting section when challenges arise
- Check success metrics to track progress

The key: You don't need to memorize this entire guide before starting. Just understand the core concept (Racing Brain vs Training Brain, 85% vs 100% alarm) and implement the 3 questions consistently.

Everything else in this guide is reference material for when you need it.

Quick Start Summary

The fastest path to implementation:

1. **Understand the core problem:** Racing Brain sends "STOP" at 85% with same urgency as 100%. Athletes can't tell the difference.
2. **Know the solution:** Systematic reflection after hard pieces teaches Racing Brain to distinguish false alarms from actual limits.
3. **Implement the 3 questions after EVERY hard piece:**
 - Q1: "Where did your Racing Brain tell you to back off?"
 - Q2: "Where did you actually finish?"
 - Q3: "What does that gap prove about your capacity?"
4. **Timeline:** 15-20 hard pieces with reflection = Recalibrated Racing Brain
5. **Your role:** Collect logs, look for patterns, use mechanism-based feedback

That's it. Start there. Everything else builds from this foundation.

Want Help Implementing This?

This guide gives you the tools to get started, but I do provide a variety of services if you want personalized support implementing this system with your specific team or athletes.

Team Consulting:

- Custom implementation plans for your program
- On-site training for coaches and athletes
- Ongoing support throughout your season
- Performance tracking and adjustments

Individual Athlete Coaching:

- One-on-one work with athletes who need additional support
- Sport psychology consulting for performance anxiety, race-day nerves, etc.
- Mental skills training beyond the Racing Brain framework

Team Workshops:

- 60-90 minute interactive sessions
- Introduce the Racing Brain System to your entire team
- Hands-on practice with the 3-Question Audit
- Q&A tailored to your team's specific challenges

Visit davidsschary.com/services for more information or email me david@davidsschary.com.

Stay Connected:

If you want ongoing support beyond this guide, sign up for my free weekly newsletter at davidsschary.com/blog.

What you'll get:

- Practical strategies you can implement immediately
- Case studies from real athletes and teams
- New research on mental performance
- Answers to common coaching challenges
- Advanced techniques once you've mastered the basics

Format: One email per week, 5-minute read, always actionable.

No spam, no sales pitches – just practical information to help you build mentally tough athletes.

Your Next Steps

1. **Download this guide** ✓ (You're reading it now)
 2. **Print evidence logs** (Template at the end of this guide)
 3. **Read the 4-week implementation roadmap** (Starts on page 61)
 4. **Implement Monday** after your next hard piece
 5. **Join the newsletter** for ongoing support (davidschary.com/blog)
 6. **Book your free consultation if you want personalized guidance**
-

Questions? Feedback? Success stories?

I'd love to hear how you're using these tools. Reach out anytime: david@davidschary.com



SLIDE 32: START MONDAY - YOUR ACTION PLAN

After your next hard piece:

1. Hand out evidence logs
2. Athletes answer 3 questions (90 seconds)
3. Collect logs
4. Skim for patterns

That's it. Start there.

COACH ANNOTATION

The biggest barrier to implementation is overthinking it.

Don't try to implement everything at once.

You don't need to:

- Master the neuroscience
- Read this entire guide before starting
- Overhaul your entire coaching philosophy
- Have perfect language ready

Just start with the 3 questions.

Monday's implementation:

1. Print evidence logs (one per athlete) - template at end of this guide
2. After your hard piece, explain: "We're training your Racing Brain. Answer these 3 questions. Takes 90 seconds."
3. Collect the logs

4. Skim for patterns (you'll see who writes specific answers vs vague)
5. Done

That's the entire intervention.

Week 1 expectations:

- Athletes will be confused
- Answers will be vague
- Some will resist
- That's normal

Your job Week 1: Keep reinforcing specificity. "Where EXACTLY did the alarm go off?"

Week 2: You'll start seeing patterns. Athletes will notice them too.

Week 3-4: Recalibration starts showing up in performance.

The key: Consistency over perfection.

Do the 3 questions after every hard piece. That's what creates the 15-20 exposures needed for recalibration.

You can refine your language and feedback as you go. But the core intervention (the 3-question reflection) is what drives the change.

Start simple. Get reps. Adjust as needed.

IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE: NEXT STEPS

Week-by-Week Roadmap

WEEK 1: ESTABLISH THE PROTOCOL

Goal: Get athletes familiar with the 3-question reflection

What You Do:

- 5-minute team meeting to introduce concept
- Print logs for everyone
- Walk through questions as a group after first hard piece
- Collect logs after each practice
- Reinforce specificity

What to Expect:

- Vague answers
- Resistance from some athletes
- Confusion

How to Respond: Show examples of good vs bad reflection. Keep reinforcing: "Be specific."

Metrics: 2-3 hard pieces, 80%+ completion

WEEK 2: PATTERN RECOGNITION

Goal: Athletes start noticing fade points

What You Do:

- Review logs, identify patterns
- Change post-practice questions
- Start using skills-based language
- Continue collecting logs

What to Expect:

- Athletes notice patterns
- Reflection gets specific
- Some still skip

How to Respond: Celebrate pattern recognition. Reinforce that reflection makes suffering productive.

Metrics: 3-4 hard pieces, 90%+ completion

WEEK 3: EVIDENCE ACCUMULATION

Goal: Athletes push through false alarms because they have proof

What You Do:

- Point out accumulated evidence
- Use mechanism-based feedback
- Frame pieces before they start
- Continue systematic reflection

What to Expect:

- Athletes reference logs during pieces
- Performance improvements appear
- Buy-in increases

How to Respond: Reinforce the mechanism: "You're teaching your nervous system. This is neurological recalibration."

Metrics: 4-5 hard pieces, 100% completion

WEEK 4: INTEGRATION & MAINTENANCE

Goal: Reflection becomes automatic

What You Do:

- Individual log reviews
- Shift to athlete-led reflection
- Add optional pre-race checklist
- Continue mechanism feedback

What to Expect:

- Reflection feels normal
- Athletes use Racing Brain language
- Measurable improvements
- Old patterns may resurface under extreme stress (normal)

How to Respond: "You completed 16 pieces with reflection. That's the work. The PR is evidence it works."

Metrics: 4-5 hard pieces, Total: 15-20 ✓

QUICK TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDE

PROBLEM: "This isn't working for me"

Check:

- How many hard pieces with reflection? (Need 15-20 minimum)
 - Are they being specific or writing "felt hard"?
 - Are they actually doing hard pieces or moderate intensity?
 - Is training load appropriate? (Overtraining breaks this)
-

PROBLEM: Athletes resist reflection

Say this: "You're already suffering in the piece. The only question is whether that suffering teaches your Racing Brain something useful. Reflection makes suffering productive. Without it, you're just confirming discomfort should be avoided."

PROBLEM: Performance isn't improving

Check:

- Is this a Racing Brain issue or physical capacity issue?
- Are they recovering adequately?
- Is the training plan appropriate?
- Do they need sport psych support beyond this framework?

Mental skills training cannot override physical breakdown.

EVIDENCE LOG

Hard Piece #1

Piece Label

Piece #: _____

Distance / Duration: _____

Q1. The Alarm: Where did your Racing Brain tell you to back off?

- Be specific: distance, time, or stroke count
- What did the alarm say? What sensations showed up?
- *Example: 1200m. Legs burning. Breathing panicked. "You can't hold this."*

Q2. The Truth: Where did you actually finish?

- What actually happened, not how it felt
- Include distance, split changes, or execution
- *Example: Finished full 2000m. Last 250m split slipped slightly but I didn't stop.*

Q3. The Evidence: What does this prove about your capacity?

- What did your Racing Brain get wrong?
- What does this piece add to your evidence?
- *Example: The stop signal was early. I had ~800m more than my brain predicted.*

LANGUAGE QUICK REFERENCE

BEFORE PIECES:

✗ "Just be tough today"

✓ "Your Racing Brain will alarm around 1200m. That's expected. Notice it, name it, take the next stroke."

DURING PIECES (Coxswains):

✗ "Don't give up!"

✓ "Your Racing Brain is screaming. That's just noise. Next stroke."

AFTER PIECES:

✗ "Great job, you looked tough!"

✓ Ask the 3 questions. Let them answer.

WHEN THEY FADE AGAIN:

✗ "You're not trying hard enough"

✓ "Your Racing Brain's alarm is still calibrated too low. Not a character problem—a training problem. We need more reps."

SUCCESS METRICS (After 15-20 Pieces)

- ✓ Athletes can identify their Racing Brain's alarm threshold
- ✓ Reflection is automatic, not forced
- ✓ Language shifts from character-based to skills-based
- ✓ Measurable performance improvements in hard pieces
- ✓ Athletes reference their evidence when doubt shows up

FINAL THOUGHTS FOR COACHES

You've been hoping your rowers are tough enough.
But hope is not a strategy.

Mental toughness is a biological system.
You now know how to train it.

The question is: Will you?

Start Monday.

NEXT STEPS

1. Read this guide completely
 2. Print evidence logs this weekend (template below)
 3. Implement Monday after your first hard piece
 4. Follow the 4-week roadmap
 5. Track patterns, celebrate progress, adjust as needed
-

CONTACT & SUPPORT

Questions? Comments? Want to Chat? Send me an email, I'd love to hear from you.
david@davidschary.com

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