

Sport Psychology Was Critical to Trans-Atlantic Rower's Success

Madison, WI—May 2010—Seventy days...alone...rowing a 19-foot boat nearly 3,000 miles on the open Atlantic.

How would you cope?

On March 15, 22-year-old Katie Spotz, Mentor, Ohio, completed that very journey, becoming the youngest person and the first woman to row solo across the Atlantic.

Record-Setting Mental Strength

How did she master the discouragement that would compel most of us—even the majority of high-performance rowers—to give up? “Focusing on one challenge at a time was the key. I continually reminded myself that my goal was to complete the task at hand—that I wasn’t going to conquer the Atlantic in a single day. I would do it one oar stroke at a time,” Spotz said.

Spotz learned her present-focused strategy from Jack J. Lesyk, Ph.D., a Beachwood, Ohio, sport psychologist, who is certified by the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP). “This is more a mental than a physical challenge. I could have been the strongest, most fit woman in the world, but I wouldn’t have made it without mental strength,” said Spotz.

Equal Parts Physical and Psychological Preparation

Of course, Spotz was well equipped and thoroughly prepared. Her custom-built boat was fully stocked with high-tech survival, navigational, communications, and safety gear. Targeted, high-intensity workouts and trial rows on the Great Lakes put her in top physical shape. But she is sure that her sessions with Lesyk—about 20 in all—were just as important.

In several sessions, Spotz practiced breathing techniques aimed at controlling stress. She also learned the value of continually preparing, psychologically, for every possibility. “Preparing for everything that could possibly happen is a way to channel stress into useful activity. Preparation is critical to survival at sea, and it’s also a way of staying focused. When you’re busy preparing, you don’t have time for worry,” Spotz explained.

Psychological tools equipped Spotz to keep her cool in the face of threats, including a close call with an ocean freighter—which she describes as the scariest situation she encountered. They also helped her deal with discouragement. “There were definitely times when I didn’t know where I’d find the strength to continue on,” she said.

Spotz’s accomplishments, which include bicycling across the America, running through the Mojave Desert, and swimming the length of the Allegheny River, undoubtedly put her in the league of elite athletes. She believes, however, that anyone who wants to achieve a goal can benefit from the counsel of an AASP-certified sport and exercise psychology consultant.

“More than anything, it’s often ourselves that hold us back. We need to challenge that and find ways to overcome it,” said Spotz.

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) promotes the ethical practice, science and advocacy of sport and exercise psychology. Founded in 1986, AASP is an international, multidisciplinary, professional organization that offers certification to qualified professionals who practice sport and exercise psychology. With more than 1,200 members in 28 countries, AASP is a worldwide leader, sharing research and resources with the public via its Web site, www.appliedsportpsych.org.