

RoP S2-E11: The Mission Protocol Jan 11, 2024

Purpose: to provide a specific process for optimizing training through the Mission model of using the Brief & Debrief in conjunction with Intention to raise the stakes in training. So often the challenge with training is that we are unclear on what the session is designed for. We'll trust our coach to devise a plan, or as a coach, I'll devise a plan & trust my athletes are clear on what the session is attempting to achieve. & so much is lost in the translation because things are not explicit enough (the Brief), a mission is not set so commitment is low (Intention), therefore the session is compromised & there is very little opportunity taken to tighten the feedback (Debrief).

The Mission Protocol.

The Brief is the Vision. The intention is the Seed. Training is the water/ground/conditions. Rest & recovery are the Harvest. The Debrief is the Full Belly & Story/Map for future Vision.

The Brief: This sets the stage. There is something that needs/wants to be accomplished in the context of a larger picture around What the Race Requires. Either we are dealing in a lack, or consolidating gains for testing the system. Or all of the above or some other combination. The important thing is that there is an objective to accomplish, a Vision. Because of the importance of this Vision there must be a great deal of trust in it. This is the trust of the overall plan in distance training. Typically this is designed by the coach. If you are self-coached, this becomes much more fraught & challenging, but if you consistently utilize this Mission Protocol, you'll find that a rhythm develops what you can count on. & in the case of having a coach, a good bit of skepticism is in order because a plan that works for one person may not work for everyone. But this is the topic of a whole other podcast. Ultimately, you have a Vision for what needs to happen.

In the Telos system I break this down in some detail for my athletes:

1. *The Session Details:* the reps, the rest the pace/effort & the warm-up/cooldown
2. *What To Expect:* How the workout is intended to play out or specific problems, challenges & logistics that are useful to be aware of prior to getting started.
3. *The Purpose:* Every session has a reason it is being prescribed. So what are the physiological, psychological or soul related reasons for even embarking on the session.

Example:

Three Quarters

The Session:

Warm-up should be 20-30 min & cooldown to get the desired long run volume.

3 x 15 min w/ 1-2 min rest

- Rep 1 at or around MGP
- Rep 2 at or around hMGP
- Rep 3 at or around hMGP or faster

Keep the rest short! Better to keep it at 1 minute between reps one & two, then stretch it up to 2 min between reps two & three, only if necessary.

The Details: This is a pretty classic threshold session where the real focus is on getting a little quicker within each 15 minute rep, while also targeting a faster pace at the start of each rep. The focus should be control & smooth rhythm through the whole session. You should not be running too hard on that final rep. Instead focus on efforts & keeping a steady consistent, controlled rhythm throughout the entire 45 minutes of work. Turns out this is a really excellent half-marathon specific session, as well. Bonus!

What to Expect: Those who have been with me for long enough know the 3 x 5K session that I used to implement occasionally. This is really very similar to that session, so that may help some of you. Generally, this session should be very doable for most of you at the paces/efforts indicated unless you are stretching toward a goal that is very challenging. If you are chasing a tough goal, this one will put you in a very challenging space in the final 15 minutes. For everyone else - & that should be 99.9% of you - it should be really a very manageable session, especially in comparison with many of our typical Long Run Quality sessions.

The Purpose: We are doing double duty in the physiological purpose for this session: we are minimizing aerobic stress while maximizing the aerobic enzymes that are really essential for optimizing energy usage at any paces/efforts slower than your aerobic threshold. More simply: you get better at using the energy at hand - or in the legs, to be less metaphorical. It also greatly improves our ability to feel strong, smooth & responsive through longer bouts of work with significantly less mental & physical fatigue.

The Intention: An intention is a mental state. Where the Brief is more logistical & systematic, the intention is the fuel behind the next step or action. Something needs to take us from concept to reality. & that is the power of what we usually call will. Will is a fine word for Intention but it has a tendency to be overused & less impactful in my experience. But use whatever works for you.

There is a provisionality around the word intention that is purposeful: just planning & willing a thing are obviously not enough. Some frisson of energy, some spark needs to occur to take the tinder of the vision & apply an elemental miracle of becoming fire. What is this mysterious action?

I like to use the concept of intention playing out at the level of the Field. A Field is the ongoing state of potential energy available outside the causal realm of input/output binaries. Something is coming into the frame that is outside our typical time/space relationships. It is an acausal agent: something independent of prior, actual & potential. Something the current worldview does not account for but has always been in play in indigenous cultures & is accounted for in more sophisticated physics models of the universe.

Aside: This is around the time some of you will raise your hands in frustration & cry "Woo-woo!!" Okay. If you can't get with this, move on. Why or How it operates is significantly less important than That It Works. & I am not going to go into a defense of this position. I just want to point to the Field & say that much of what is the actual energetic spark of this protocol is happening here. We can unpack at another time. But if there are some of you who just cannot abide by this leap, I ask you to consider the emotions: fear, love, anger, bliss. These are also very active "energies" that we allow into our cultural worldviews

that are acting fundamentally at the level of the Field. So for the sake of this continued discussion, let's table this & move on.

So the Intention is the personalized brief packed with the energetic energy of desire. Once you have received the brief from your coach, then you need to make it yours. You need to contextualize it in the space of your own life. You need to account for your emotions, stress-levels, work/life balance, energy levels, excitement, mood & will. Once your Brief is set, the first step is to personalize it into the Intention. Each athlete will start with the same Brief, but have a highly idiosyncratic Intention. This is where the actual energy/fire comes into the process. What we commonly call willpower is the energy one can devote to the desire one has to accomplish an outcome. I like to call this Fire. It's an elemental energy everyone can relate to. Will can be confusing & can develop a tinge of fascism or slave mentality. Fire is always active, creative & highly energized. But it is typically ethically neutral. It is simply running on desire & not on projection or egoic process. It is anti-ego in that it is simply pure energy: dangerous, to be sure, but not tinged with evil.

So you'll need to take the Brief & energize it with your personal intention. Here is a potential example below, based on the Three Quarts session I already Briefed.

Intention: I have a half marathon race coming up in the next 6 weeks so I can approach this as a race specific session. I'll prepare the evening before as if it were a race: I'll set out my kit, have my fueling planned & know my paces/efforts. But I'll also bring forward the concept I have been working on - based on Steve's essay about Dancing on the Edge. I will tackle the final two quarters with the intention of pushing to the edge of what I am capable of, testing the way it feels rhythmically, mechanically & energetically. Can I hold this? How long can I sustain it? Where is the outside edge of what I can handle? & in my tension, I'll make a point to take some risks now in training so I am capable of determining the best course of action on race day.

In terms of the wording or how you get the intention down to its pithy core, don't worry too much. Once you begin to do this 2-3 times per week, you'll create a process that works for you.

One note about Self-Trust. The thing about trust is that it is earned, not given. If you want to develop self-trust, you have to put in the work. I consider the Intention aspect of the Mission Protocol the key ingredient in developing the self-trust we all desire when standing on the starting line. Starting line experiences are determined by the level of self-trust one has developed. The actual race result comes from each step covered between the starting & finish lines but we are already on auto-pilot, or as close as we can get to auto-pilot, to help engender the flow state.

Note: I don't mention it above, but you will have access to an Intention Log after you go through the Mission Protocol. The Intention Log is a place where you write down your key learnings from the Mission Protocol to bring forward in future Intention settings. Over time, key themes & insights will arise that can be used as fodder for our intentional awareness & processed, or metabolized, through the future Protocol process. See more detail on the IntentionLog below.

Session Execution: I'll have much more to say about this in other episodes but what is most important to say is that you want to bring the intention into action. So keeping your intention close in your mind will help. Mantras, songs, lyrics, quotes, etc all help in offloading the expensive cognitive churn that thinking entails. So having a simple, easily remembered & implemented mental attack is a core aspect of

Intention that needs to be considered.

Aside: Remember that workouts have pauses, rests & breaks. Races do not. So one really important aspect of the actual session is to realize it is all “of a piece”. While the session will have different levels of effort/pace distributed across the workout, the session is the whole ball of wax. Keep this in mind when you consider your intentions & the ways you bring the intention forward in actual practice.

Aside: Before I discuss the Debrief in detail, I want to introduce another potential outcome that is very important in the Telos system: the successful failure. The successful failure occurs when we do not succeed in the Brief but the Intention sees us through or we learn something critical we can use to be better prepared for our race through going through the mission protocol. In some cases, especially when we are doing really challenging sessions, we want to have a failure so it can become a successful failure. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the Mission Protocol: learning how to allow, accept & learn from not hitting the Brief. In fact, some specific sessions should be undertaken with the full expectation that there will be a failure, in order to train our nervous system to be resilient & adaptive. Much of what we have been talking about here is happening “above the hood”. “Below the hood”, the nervous system is the boss & it has only one objective: keep this body/mind safe. The entire Mission Protocol is designed to train your nervous system to allow a long leash. Because once it gets triggered, it’s gonna yank back hard & there will be very, very little you can do to overcome the limitations it places on you in the heat of battle. Interestingly, when this occurs, we always deny that the failure is mental. We tend to experience the pain as a near complete biological shutdown of the entire system. But each part is likely ready to operate at near or above maximum capacity. It’s just that the nervous system threw the breaker on the whole system to ensure that what it perceived as catastrophic failure, Death, was avoided. Much of the work of the Debrief is turning these potential failures into successful failures by clearly & soberly discussing what went down out on the road.

The Debrief:

In the session we’ll either fail or succeed, based on the Brief & Intention set. In my opinion, the successful failure is still a success. Regardless of outcome, a Debrief is absolutely essential to the Mission Protocol. In fact, if the Debrief does not occur, a significantly lower probability of physiological benefit will be accrued’ to say nothing of the waste of all that mental effort. So even if you have a very limited time, you need to do the Debrief. What follows is the pure essentials. Of course, as with your Intention, developing your own idiosyncratic process will pay significant dividends over the multiple protocols you go through in a season. Remember, the goal is developing self-trust. To trust yourself, you need to know what you excel at & what you need to work on. If this does not occur, you leave important learnings to waste.

The Pure Essentials:

What happened? Success/Successful Fail or Fail

Why? What happened in the session that allowed the success or failure to occur?

What to Do Differently? Sometimes we simply execute ineffectively. We have the skills, the intention & the energy but we missed something. Or fumbled. Or poorly executed.

These kinds of learnings are the easiest. They are typically lying in plain sight. Either, it's an obvious oversight or misstep, or we lacked the courage or energy to finish. But there is a discrete moment where we know we messed up. Simply note this & then indicate what needs to be done differently. These insights need to be gathered into your Intention Log. More on this below.

What Did I Miss? More subtly, there are failures that we tend to be blind to. We don't know what we did not do. Again, merely note this in your Intention Log. Frequently, we can't see the situation clearly right after the session, but with some time & space, we begin to intuit there is something missing in our perception or effort that can be corrected. These subtle clues are the most valuable because they are hidden from our awareness by our personal biases & habits. These are deeply rooted in pattern & identity & take a lot of time & effort to uproot. But we need not go right at them immediately. In fact, this is not recommended as an approach. If we simply document our experience, as questions around what we missed & why, our subconscious will begin to work on the problem & answers will be forthcoming. These typically show up in our dreamlife & we'll address this at another time. But just know that your body already has a well-oiled process for keeping you safe & bringing forward areas you need to address & worth through that do not require your conscious mind. Again, simply allow & work on what you already have in front of you to explore.

What's Next? Once you have your finger on the problem or problems, bring them forward in a short, pithy statement that you add to your Intention log. This log I describe below is merely the repository of the learnings from your debrief, allowed to percolate & filter into key insights & statements you want to take forward into your next mission through this protocol.

The Intention Log

As mentioned above, we want to compound our learning interest through record keeping. Of course, we could just Brief, Intend, Train & Debrief & get a huge benefit. But that benefit will merely be the gleanings from a single session. By keeping an ongoing Intention Log, an athlete can begin to track their experiences & locate patterns & habits that they would like to cease. Or note a lack of some key aspect that they want to encourage. When we merely approach each effort as a discrete experience, we fail to recognize that the telos system is operating a multiple levels & take advantage of the varying

What You Need:

- *A Notebook.* Either paper or an online notebook will work. I always recommend working in the analog, hand-written format. There is an embodied wisdom & awareness aspect that seems to trigger the operations of the yield in the human psyche that I have not noticed in the virtual realm. However, whatever you do, get the words down where you can review them in the future.
- *Time for Review:* As with all the steps in this protocol, you need time to review for the lessons to reveal themselves. It is no different in reviewing your Debrief & turning that content into a log for future intentions.
- *Honest Appraisal:* You really want to be open & honest about what happened in your session & hopefully that comes through in the Debrief. After all, the entire point of taking the time to Brief, set Intentions, execution the session & Debrief is so you can trust your experience to allow you to reinforce good outcomes & avoid the kinds of moments in future training & racing. This requires that you not be full of shit. So be sure you are being honest & true in your assessment so that what comes through in your Intention Log is trustworthy & useful.

- *Courage:* For some of you, even taking the time & effort to implement the Mission Protocol will require courage to overcome your bias towards the inde of intentions & an Intentional Field. But for everyone, there will be moments of losing our nerve, of flinching at our weakness, fears & weaknesses. But this is the entire purpose for this process: to develop the self-trust necessary to stand on the starting line open & honest in our self-assessment, feeling confident in the uncertainty the race conditions require & still going all the way the fuck in on our goal. There is an opportunity here to doing something incredible that will be thwarted by lack of courage & trust. Again, this is the entire reason for this process.

So once you have gone through the Debrief, & have an active Intention Log of recorded experiences distilled in writing, the process is complete.

What's Next? This Mission Protocol is meant to operate as an upward spiral. We take the Debrief content, distilled in our Intention Log to meet the next workout session & start the process over. After you've gone through this 4-6 times, a natural rhythm will take over & you'll find your own way of working. As long as you focus on the key aspects of the protocol, the specific ways you go about it should be personalized for greater applicability & resonance. This is not a strict, set process. Allow it to grow & morph in any way that feels authentic & creative to you.

Won't This Take Forever? No, not forever. But it does require a commitment of both time & effort. Initially, this can seem a bit of a waste because you've never experienced the power of the Intentional Field. But once you have a guidebook of your own experience in setting, testing & consolidating intentions, you'll recognize that this is fundamentally practical wisdom: hard-earned insights around training that will actually spend like harden currency in a race environment. & you needn't wait until race day to see if the work pays dividends: your Intention Log will begin to be incredibly useful in designing future Mission Protocols & eventually, your race plan. If that's not practical, then I don't know what is.

But seriously, why should I bother? Because it is the single most effective tool for developing self-trust in the fitness you are working so hard to develop. When you train without this protocol, you leave the results up to biology & chance. Now, your worldview may only recognize these two actors as scientifically causal powers. I, however, do not. I believe there are unseen powers that are yet to be fully tested or understood by science that play into what it means to be human, especially at the level of high performance. While I may agree that those who are okay with "just enough" in terms of their performance, may only require empirically justified biological facts & the randomness of chance, I am very confident that those who are attempting to operate at their full human capacity will need to add Old Ways to their performance toolbox.

For me these include intention, the Field, free will & other concepts our modern scientific-materialist milieu rejects. But this is my mission. Ultimately, I recommend you test these ideas out in your personal experience & report back your findings.

If you want to share you experiences, feel free to email me at sisson@telosrunning.com. The Telos Running training program will be working through many of these specific ideas in our monthly group meetings, so if these ideas spark a deep interest in you, I provide guidance & insights around these ideas

while also providing personalized, periodized training that has been road-tested & proven effective over many years.