

# Become a Better Runner in Your Sleep

*By Nancy Averett*

Runner's World In October 1989, just five days after calf cramps had forced her to slow her pace in Minneapolis's Twin Cities Marathon, Kim Jones experienced a vivid dream. The 31-year-old saw herself gliding along the New York City Marathon course, floating up hills, passing competitors and, most important, running pain-free. Jones decided to enter New York—never mind that it was less than four weeks away, hardly enough time for a proper recovery.

Jones went on to place second and post the fastest American women's time on the course at the time: 2:27:54, a nearly four-minute improvement on her Twin Cities race. "I carried the dream with me," says Jones, now 49. "I had this clear image of myself running well, and it made me feel confident and strong."

Today, the masters athlete and running coach who lives in Fort Collins, Colorado, encourages her clients to pursue their dreams as well. An increasing number of sports psychologists also are endorsing dreams as a training tool that can boost confidence and performance. "There's so much untapped potential in our dreams that can be applied to all kinds of endeavors, including athletics," says Deirdre Barrett, Ph.D., clinical assistant professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School. In her book *The Committee of Sleep: How Artists, Scientists, and Athletes Use Dreams for Creative Problem-Solving—and How You Can Too*, Barrett cites how legendary golfer Jack Nicklaus and boxing champion Floyd Patterson dreamed their way to better performances.

While you sleep, your brain processes the thoughts, actions, and emotions of your day and mixes them with experiences from your past. The result is a screenplay of sights, sounds, and interactions that might seem chaotic and nonsensical, but Barrett says they can offer a window into your subconscious. This can help you uncover obstacles, develop an inspiring picture of success, and even work out on a virtual training ground.

## **Night Vision**

You can't learn from your dreams if you can't remember them, so the first step to unlocking the power of your subconscious is to learn dream recall. To develop this skill, Veronica Tonay, Ph.D., a psychologist in Santa Cruz, California, and author of *The Creative Dreamer*, recommends keeping a journal next to your bed and recording the details immediately upon waking. The journal will help you identify ongoing themes, which Tonay says are often signs of a problem that your mind is fixated on.

Tonay once worked with a runner who had a recurring dream: He was running on a trail that was blocked by a boulder; each time he encountered it, he'd quit. He concluded that it represented his tendency to give up whenever his training became difficult. After making this connection, he joined a running group, which gave him the support he needed to stay on track. Another runner had bad dreams leading up to a marathon: He was stuck in traffic and missed the race; he forgot his timing chip; he threw up at the start. "With dreams like that, you should question if you're emotionally and physically ready," Tonay says. "It could mean that you aren't properly trained, your goal is too ambitious, or you're putting too much pressure on yourself."

Occasionally, dreams can be so striking that they seem automatically engraved in your mind—no journaling or analysis necessary, as was the case with Kim Jones. These dreams may appear to be random, but there are ways to encourage your brain to create them, says Steven Ungerleider, Ph.D., a sports psychologist in Eugene, Oregon. Ungerleider's research shows that athletes who envision themselves performing well throughout the day tend to have these positive visions at night, most likely because they are reinforcing the image of success in their brains. "Athletes who

do a lot of mental training and visualization exercises have quite prolific dreams," Ungerleider says. "They take the inspiration they get from those dreams and apply it to their training the next day, recreating the cycle."

Another way to influence dream content is through lucid dreaming, a practice that involves training yourself to become aware you are dreaming without waking up. Once you learn this technique, you can shape your dream, because your awareness allows you to dictate what happens. "Maybe you want to work on lengthening your stride, so you dream that you are jumping over hurdles," says Dominick Attisani of the Lucidity Institute, a Palo Alto, California, organization that teaches the technique. "Or you could work on your speed by turning into the bionic woman."

Lucid dreaming may sound fanciful, but Attisani says athletes who rehearse skills in a dream can perform them better upon awakening because they're strengthening the neural pathways between brain and muscles. Even though your muscles appear still during a dream, experiments have shown that your brain is firing messages and the muscles are responding. For instance, Lucidity Institute researchers have asked subjects to make a fist while dreaming. They don't make the full movement, but electrical impulses are recorded in their hands, indicating that the muscles have responded.

Lucid dreams can also provide a mental boost. Athletes can conjure up a scene where they beat a competitor, giving them confidence to actually do it. "It helps you get past that tape recorder in your head that says you can't do something," Attisani says. What's more, when athletes have lucid dreams, Barrett says they tend to feel unusually happy, which can be channeled directly into a workout. In 2001, Barrett studied collegiate swimmers who had lucid dreams. All reported feeling elated upon waking and they posted faster times at future practices.

"I have this feeling of freedom and joy," says Martin Spies-Sweetland, 43, a German track-and-field athlete, adding that later, when he is awake and is running, this positive charge helps him run faster. He says it's also helped him improve his long jump. "It occurred to me in a lucid dream how important it is to bring the hips up," he says. "I never realized that before. So I applied it to real life, and it improved my performance." Spies-Sweetland is a father of three who doesn't have time to train as much as his competitors. But he says lucid dreaming gives him an advantage: "I consider it my personal secret of training."