



Mental Strength Training Workbook For Athletes **~ Strategies and Tactics to Achieve Peak Performance ~**



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Table of Contents

Goal Setting	3
Imagery	6
Relaxation and Energizing.....	12
Self-Talk	14
Mental Strength Plan	25
Performance Profiling.....	30
Flow Mind-Set	34
Sharpen Your Focus.....	36
Confidence – Expectation.....	44
Focus	46

Goal Setting

Guidelines for Setting Effective Goals

1. Emphasize process and performance goals as a higher priority than outcome goals
2. Set specific, measurable goals (SMARTER) rather than general or “do-your-best” goals
3. Set moderately difficult goals that are challenging but realistic – shoot for the eagle, you’ll bag the pheasant and you won’t eat crow
4. Set positive focused goals as opposed to negative (what you don’t want) goals
5. Set both long-term objective and short-term goals, with short-term goals serving as the building block for reaching long-term objective
6. Set both individual and team goals, with individual goals becoming the role-specific steps used to attain team goals
7. Set both practice and competitive goals, with practice goals focusing on developing skills and competitive goals geared to performing optimally

Difference Between Practice and Competitive Goals

Dimensions	Practice Goals	Competitive Goals
Goal Focus	Developing skills	Performing optimally
Mental Skills Emphasized	Focus, concentration and motivation	Poise, confidence and stress management
Types of Goals Set	Outcome, performance and practice	Process and performance
Level of Goal Difficulty	Push the comfort zone	Keep realistic for current performance capabilities

Long-term Objective Format - “What do I want?”

1. **Stated in the positive**
 - a. What you want – positive focus
2. **Self-initiated, self-maintained and in my control**
 - a. Am I doing this for myself or someone else
3. **Specific evidence procedure (SMARTER Goals)**
 - a. How will I know that I am getting (or got) the outcome?
 - b. What will I be doing when I get it?
 - c. What will I see, hear and feel when I have it?
4. **Context clearly defined**
 - a. Context of goal clearly defined - Where, when, how and with whom do I want it?
5. **Identify needed resources**
 - a. What resources do I have now?
 - b. What resources do I need to acquire?
 - c. Do I evidence of achieving this (or similar) before?
 - d. What would happen if I act *as if* I have all the resources required?
6. **Is it ecological**
 - a. What is the *real* purpose why I want this?
 - b. What will I lose or gain if I have it?
 - c. What will happen if I get it?
 - d. What won't happen if I get it?
 - e. What will happen if I don't get it?
 - f. What won't happen if I don't get it?

7. Identify the first step to take

“The journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step” Lao-Tzu

How to Establish S.M.A.R.T.E.R Goals

Goal: “the result or achievement toward which effort is directed; aim; end.”

S = Specific and Simple

M = Measurable and Meaningful to you

A = “As if now” and achievable

R = Realistic

T = Timed – by when

E = Evaluate – check your progress

R = Revise – If what you're doing isn't working, do something else

You get what you focus on, so focus on what you want!

Now combine your achievable outcome and SMARTER goal and develop your own:

Goal Setting Worksheet

Long Term Goal	Date of Achievement

SMARTER Goals

SMARTER Goals	Date of Achievement

Areas to Improve

Areas to Improve	Specific Objectives

Weekly Goal Setting

Goal Setting		Week Of:							
Goals	Current Level	Goal Level	M	T	W	TH	F	Game	Performance Average

Imagery

Evaluating Imagery Ability

Directions: Below you will read descriptions of four general sport situations.

After you read each general description, think of a specific example of it – the skill, the people involved, the place, and the time. Close your eyes and take a few deep breathes to become as relaxed as you can.

Put aside all other thoughts.

Keep your eyes closed for about one minute as you try to imagine the situation. If you have distracting thoughts, gently redirect your attention to the scene you are imagining.

There are, of course, no right or wrong images. Your accurate appraisal of your image will help you to determine what skills you need to focus on in the development of your imagery-training program.

After imagining the situation, rate the following imagery dimensions by circling the appropriate number.

Situation 1: Select a specific skill or activity in your sport. Imagine yourself performing the activity in the place where you would normally practice, without anyone else present. Now close your eyes for about a minute and try to see yourself at this place, see what you would see, hear what you would hear, feel what you feel and be aware of your mood.

Rating Key

1 = Very poorly

5 = Very well

A	Rate how well you saw yourself performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
B	Rate how well you heard the sounds of performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
C	Rate how well you were able to feel yourself performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
D	Rate how well you were aware of your mood and emotions	1	2	3	4	5
E	Rate how well you were able to control your image	1	2	3	4	5

Situation 2: You are performing the same activity but are now practicing the skill with the coach and your teammates present. This time, however, you make a mistake that everyone notices, but you remain calm, recover quickly, correct your mistake, and perform well. Now close your eyes for about one minute and imagine making the error, correcting it, and performing well as clearly as possible

Rating Key

1 = Very poorly

5 = Very well

A	Rate how well you saw yourself performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
B	Rate how well you heard the sounds of performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
C	Rate how well you were able to feel yourself performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
D	Rate how well you were aware of your mood and emotions	1	2	3	4	5
E	Rate how well you were able to control your image	1	2	3	4	5

Situation 3: Think of a teammate performing a specific activity successfully in a contest or competition – for example, making a 20-foot shot, passing other runners, or making a field goal. Now close your eyes for about one minute to imagine watching your teammate performing this activity successfully in a critical part of the competition as vividly and realistically as possible.

Rating Key

1 = Very poorly

5 = Very well

A	Rate how well you saw yourself performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
B	Rate how well you heard the sounds of performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
C	Rate how well you were able to feel yourself performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
D	Rate how well you were aware of your mood and emotions	1	2	3	4	5
E	Rate how well you were able to control your image	1	2	3	4	5

Situation 4: Image yourself performing the same or similar activity in a competition, but image yourself performing very skillfully. Spectators and teammates show their appreciation and excitement. Now close your eyes for about one minute and imagine the situation as vividly as possible.

Rating Key

1 = Very poorly

5 = Very well

A	Rate how well you saw yourself performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
B	Rate how well you heard the sounds of performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
C	Rate how well you were able to feel yourself performing the activity	1	2	3	4	5
D	Rate how well you were aware of your mood and emotions	1	2	3	4	5
E	Rate how well you were able to control your image	1	2	3	4	5

Now add up your responses to each situational questions and write your score in the spaces below:

Dimension	Score
Visual (all "A" items)	
Auditory (all "B" items)	
Kinesthetic (all "C" items)	
Mood (all "D" items)	
Control (all "E" items)	
Total	

Compare your scores for each dimension to the following skill categories.

Score	Rating
18 - 20	Good skills. Periodically do imagery exercise to stay sharp
13 - 17	Average skills. Spend regular time each week improving these skills
0 - 12	Poor skills. These need daily attention to bring your imagery skills to useful levels

Enhancing Sports Performance Using PETTLEP Imagery

Imagery is a key psychological skill, with an impressive array of published studies testifying to its efficacy in enhancing motor skill performance. Given the piecemeal nature of the imagery literature, which has been published in many different sport psychology, mainstream psychology, cognitive psychology and neuroscience journals, it has not been easy in the past for applied sport psychology practitioners, coaches and athletes to piece all this together and make use of it in their work.

Realizing the need for a theory and research-based model of imagery to help guide practitioners' use of imagery, Holmes and Collins (2001) devised the PETTLEP model.

This model is based on theory and research findings from sport psychology, cognitive psychology and neuroscience, and aims to provide practitioners with a set of practical guidelines to aid their imagery use.

PETTLEP is an acronym, with each letter representing an important factor for practitioners to consider when implementing imagery interventions, as follows:

<u>Letter</u>	<u>Component</u>
P	Physical
E	Environment
T	Task
T	Timing
L	Learning
E	Emotion
P	Perspective

The components of the PETTLEP model

P – Physical. This is arguably the most important PETTLEP component. Rather than conceptualizing imagery as something entirely different from physical practice, here imagery is seen as a physical process with measurable physiological outcomes.

For optimal benefits, imagery should be as physical an experience as possible. One obvious way of achieving this is to laden the imagery instructions with the performer's physiological responses.

Indeed, research has shown that response-laden imagery instructions are more effective than ones lacking kinesthetic cues (Smith et al., 2001).

Other ways of making the imagery more physical include wearing the same clothes as during performance, and holding any associated implements (e.g. tennis racquet, golf club).

E – Environment. This relates to the place where imagery is performed. According to PETTLEP this should be as similar as possible to the performance environment.

Indeed, we have found imagery to be most effective when it is performed in the actual competitive arena (Smith et al., 2007). Of course, this is unlikely to be a practical option for most people's regular imagery training, and therefore the use of video and audio may be useful in aiding mental simulation of the venue.

Be innovative, as improvisation can pay great dividends. For example, in one study (Smith, Wright & Cantwell, 2008) we had golfers image their bunker shots whilst standing in a tray of sand. The golfers liked the fact that they could feel their golf shoes contacting the sand and that their posture was identical to that adopted in the actual bunker. This was very effective in enhancing bunker shot performance.

T – Task. The content of the imagery should be appropriate to the skill level and the personal preferences of the athlete. For example, given that the attentional focus of athletes in different sports and at different performance levels may differ in a number of ways, the content of the imagery needs to be specific to the performer.

Indeed, we have found it very useful to quiz the athlete regarding his or her attentional focus during performance when planning the imagery intervention.

T – Timing. This refers to the speed at which imagery is completed. Given that timing is often crucial when performing sports skills, the suggestion here is to have the athlete perform the imagery in ‘real time’ most of the time. We have found this approach effective with a wide range of athletes in various sports.

However, more research is needed on the possible uses of slow motion imagery as there are some interesting questions that remain to be explored, such as whether slow motion imagery could be useful in correcting errors in form-based skills.

L – Learning. This emphasizes that the content of the imagery should be adapted in response to learning, as the cognitions and feelings experienced during movement will change as an individual becomes more skilled.

This PETTLEP component has not received a great deal of research attention to date. However, in a recently completed study examining the effects of imagery on muscle strength, it has been found that a longitudinal intervention involving the regular updating of imagery content to reflect the progress participants had made – was very successful in enhancing performance.

Also, without such updating, the imagery will very quickly cease to effectively replicate real life. For instance, changes in physical condition, skill level and physical fitness can all be incorporated into the imagery.

E – Emotion. Sports performance is a very emotion-laden experience, and therefore imagery needs to be too if it is to be realistic. Indeed, Smith et al. (2007) found the PETTLEP interventions in their study to be more effective than imagery that was preceded by instructions to relax.

The inclusion of realistic emotions in the imagery instructions makes the imagery much more evocative of the real-life scenario, and may therefore lead to a more vivid imagery experience.

For example, Wilson, Smith, Holmes and Burden, (2010) found that personalized, emotion-laden imagery scripts led to greater muscle activity and higher self-rated imagery vividness compared to more generic interventions.

P – Perspective. This refers to the viewpoint of the performer during imagery. This can be internal (first person, i.e., through the eyes of the performer) or external (third person, i.e., seeing oneself performing as if watching on TV).

Holmes and Collins recommend an internal perspective for the most part as it mimics the visual perspective experienced during performance, but recognize also that for some form-based skills, such as gymnastics, the external perspective can be very effective. Also, the issue of individual preference is absolutely crucial for successful interventions.

While it may be theoretically desirable, for instance, to adopt an internal visual perspective in many cases, some athletes may find internal imagery difficult or just prefer external imagery. In such cases, it is always preferable to accommodate the athlete's wishes as far as possible so that the athlete is comfortable with what he or she is being asked to do.

So what are the key take-home messages for practitioners from the last decade of PETTTLEP research?

The most obvious one is that PETTTLEP imagery can be a potent means of enhancing sports performance. We have found it to work well with novices and experts, children and adults, and in other contexts too such as in helping student nurses perfect their nursing skills.

Research also strongly suggests that PETTTLEP works best when used as an integrated whole rather than when only some components are used. Findings also show the clear importance of personalizing imagery interventions, and of incorporating all the senses into the imagery experience. Current lines of research include trying to answer the questions of how much imagery is needed, and how often it needs to be performed, to produce optimal performance benefits.

Below is summary of key practical recommendations based on the PETTTLEP model, the research testing it and our experiences applying it in the field. Some of the ideas discussed might seem rather 'way out' and, indeed, when first trying out some of these things you may be slightly skeptical regarding the potential benefits of some of the PETTTLEP recommendations. However, experiences in research and applied practice have convinced demonstrated that the approach has strong merit, especially when compared to the traditional 'lie down and visualizes' approach that some practitioners advocate.

Perhaps most interesting, and in keeping with the importance of personalizing the imagery intervention, some of the most innovative ways we have found of employing PETTTLEP have been suggested by the athletes themselves.

For example, in the bunker shot study mentioned above, the idea of using the tray of sand came originally from one of the participants in the study. Be innovative and creative, and involve the client very much as a partner in your endeavor to produce a useful and exciting imagery intervention, and you will find it well worth the effort.

Practical Recommendation

- **PHYSICAL**

The athlete should stand in the correct stance, wearing the same clothes, and holding any implements that would be used during performance.

- **ENVIRONMENT**

If possible, the athlete should complete the imagery in the same environment where the performance or task will take place. Where this is not possible, videos, photographs, or a similar environment can be used as a substitute, e.g., a rugby player standing on grass in his or her back garden.

- **TASK**

The task being imaged should be identical in nature to the task actually being performed, and this should be altered as the skill level of the athlete changes.

- **TIMING**

The imagery should be completed in 'real time' and should take the same length of time to complete as physically performing the task.

- **LEARNING**

As the athlete becomes proficient and autonomous at the task, the imagery should be updated in order to reflect this and remain equivalent to the physical level of the athlete.

- **EMOTION**

Any emotions associated with performance should be incorporated into the imagery. This can be aided by the use of stimulus and response training.

- **PERSPECTIVE**

The imagery should usually be completed from an internal perspective (i.e., through the athlete's own eyes). This can be controlled by the use of a video to aid the imagery. However, external imagery may be useful for some form-based tasks and personal preference should also be taken into account.

References:

- Holmes, P. S., & Collins, D. J. (2001). *The PETTLEP approach to motor imagery: A functional equivalence model for sport psychologists. Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 13(1) 60-83.*
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Relaxation and Energizing

Total Relaxation and Energizing

- The objective is to attain maximal relaxation or energization
- Take as long as needed to reach a deeply relaxed or energized state (8 or above on a scale from 1 to 10, 10 being the most relaxed or energized)
- Use diaphragmic breathing with any effective relaxation strategy
- Use “psych-up” breathing with any effective energization strategy



Cued Relaxation and Energization

- This technique links total relaxation or energization with rapid relaxation or energization
- Anchor your relaxation cue word with a deeply relaxed state and your energization cue word with a highly energized state
- Repeat your relaxation cue word each time you exhale, focusing on breathing and how relaxation feels.
- Repeat your energization cue word after every 3 psych-up breaths, focusing on breathing and how energization feels



Rapid Relaxation and Energization

- Rapid relaxation and energization are designed to develop optimal relaxation and energization levels in practice and competitive situations
- For rapid relaxation, take 1 or 2 diaphragmic breaths and repeat your relaxation anchor (cue word) after each exhalation
- For rapid energization, take 3 to 6 psych-up breaths and repeat your energization anchor (cue word) after exhalation on every third breath

Tension and Energy Log

Week of						
TENSION	Rating: (Most Relaxed) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 (Most Tense)					
Situation	M	T	W	Th	F	Notes
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
Energy	Rating: (Least Energy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 (Most Energy)					
Situation	M	T	W	Th	F	Notes
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						

Use the log to record your tension and energy levels for specific situations. Use the “notes” to record specific thoughts or triggers during each situation.

Self-Talk

Positive vs. Negative Self-Talk

Positive	Negative
Positive and optimistic	Negative and pessimistic
Logical, rational and productive	Illogical, irrational and unproductive
Boosts confidence	Deflates confidence
Heightens concentration for the task on hand	Reduces focus and increases distractions
Focuses on the present	Focuses on the past or future
Stimulates optimal arousal where energy is high, positive and process-oriented	Stimulates under or over-arousal
Motivates you to push your limits	Motivates you to give up easily
Appraises problems as a challenge or opportunity	Appraises problems as threats to be eliminated
Attributes (credits) success to replicable internal factors	Attributes success to external factors that are not replicable
Alleviates stress	Promotes stress
Minimal process-oriented thinking	Extensive process-oriented thinking
Performance enhancing	Performance debilitating
Attributes (blames) failure to surmountable factors	Attributes failure to insurmountable factors

Positive Thought Patterns

- Be an optimist
- Remain realistic and objective
- Focus on the present
- Appraise problems as challenges
- View success as replicable
- There is no failure only feedback
- Concentrate on the process
- Concentrate on things you can control
- Separate your performance from your self-worth

Negative Thought Patterns

- The critic
- Distorted thinking
 - Catastrophizing (think the worst will happen)
 - Overgeneralization
 - Blaming
 - Mustification
 - Polarized thinking
- Irrational beliefs
- Perfectionism
- Fear of failure
- Social approval
- Equity
- Social comparison

Self-Talk Log

Daily PMA:

Day:

Positive Situations	Predominate Emotions	Positive Thoughts	Times Script Read
Negative Situations	Predominate Emotions	Negative Thoughts	Counter-Argument

Use the log to keep track of your positive and negative thoughts

Smart-Talk Script Development Form

Directions:

Step 1: Is to identify the purpose of your smart-talk script. Look at the accompanying Purposes and Thoughts for smart-talk script and select one or more of the seven purposes for developing a self-talk script. Write each of the purposes you choose on a separate section of this form example write your first purpose in Section 1, your second purpose in Section 2 etc.

Step 2: Is to study the form and select one or more specific thoughts to convey each purpose and record them under the Specific Thoughts that correspond to each purpose. Sample thoughts are listed for each purpose but you may also make up your own thoughts or borrow them from other sources.

Step 3: Is to number the specific thoughts in each section in the order that maximizes the flow of your script and strengthens its impact. Place at numerical ranking reflecting the order you'll want thoughts listed on your script inside the parentheses provided at the beginning of each thought.

Step 4: Is to reorder each section to create ideal flow for your script and heighten its impact of placing a ranking inside the parentheses at the beginning of each purpose. Finally, develop a catchy introduction and a powerful conclusion that will maximize the effectiveness of your smart-talk script.

Example:

Section 1 Purpose (1): Reminders of strengths and assets

Section 1 Specific Thoughts:

- (1) I have the ability, dedication and work ethic to excel in whatever I do.
- (2) I am a talented person with skills and abilities that allow me to be successful in life

Smart-Talk Script Development Form

Section 1 Purpose (1):

Section 1 Specific Thoughts

- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
-

Section 2 Purpose (2):

Section 2 Specific Thoughts

- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
-

Section 3 Purpose (3):

Section 3 Specific Thoughts

- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
-

Section 4 Purpose (4):

Section 4 Specific Thoughts

- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
-

Section 5 Purpose (5):

Section 5 Specific Thoughts

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Purpose and Thoughts for Smart-Talk Scripts

Directions: Select the main purpose for your smart talk script from section 1. He may select one purpose, or all seven, or any number in between. Next, for each purpose, select from section to any of the specific thoughts, affirmations, or counter arguments that conveyed the nature of that purpose for you. You can also use your own thoughts or borrow ideas from other sources. Write a smart talk script taste on these thoughts.

Section 1: Purpose for Script Development

1. Remind yourself of your assets, constraints, and desirable personal qualities.
2. Establish priorities and goals as well as action plans for how to achieve them.
3. Recall past successes, particularly in similar situations or when overcoming obstacles, failure, or adversity.
4. Emphasize the quantity and quality of your preparation.
5. Appraise all situations as challenges rather than threats and implement effective problem-solving strategies.
6. Reframe negative thoughts.
7. Attribute success to hard work and improving ability and failure to internal/controllable/unstable factors such as the need to try harder, to improve your mental preparation, or to develop your skills more fully.

Section 2: Sample Positive Thoughts, Affirmations, and Counterarguments

1. Reminders of Assets, Strengths, and Desirable Personal Qualities

- a. I am a talented person with skills and abilities that allow me to be as successful as I want to be in life.
- b. Ultimately I'll be judged by who I am, not by what I accomplished.
- c. I have the ability to make myself into a better performer who can help my team in many ways.
- d. I have rich, rewarding relationships with my close friends and family.
- e. I like who I am and enjoy being me. I like the person I see in the mirror.

2. Priorities and Goals Plus Action Plans to Achieve Them

- a. I have a dream or vision for what I want in life.
- b. I have set my goals, establish my priorities, and develop action plans to make them a reality.
- c. Dreams become reality through hard work and sacrifice.
- d. I have the time, energy, and wisdom to accomplish all my goals.
- e. This is a "can do", "will do, and "get things done" day.

3. Remember Past Successes in Similar Situations or How You Overcame Adversity

- a. I have been very successful in similar situations in the past.
- b. I have overcome difficult obstacles in the past and I can do it again.
- c. There is no failure only feedback and it makes me stronger by helping to identify areas where I need to improve.
- d. I know it's only a matter of time until my hard work pays off and I become successful.
- e. Overcoming failure and adversity requires a commitment to work even harder and effective plans to getting better and illuminate my weaknesses.

4. Recall the Quantity and Quality of Preparation

- a. Nobody works harder than I do, and at crunch time, I'll be in better condition and more willing to pay the price for my opponent.
- b. My physical, mental, technical and tactical training are carefully designed to prepare me perfectly to excel in this competition.
- c. My coach has taught me to understand my opponents gain and to counter these tactics successfully.
- d. I have prepared myself well to maximize my strengths and minimize my weaknesses.
- e. I get a little bit better every day in practice and move a step closer to being the best I can be.

5. Appraise Situations as Challenges, not Threats, and Problem-solve Effectively

- a. Everyone in counters failure and adversity. Champions rise above adversity by viewing problems as opportunities for excellence.
- b. I recognize that mistakes are a normal part of learning. As long as I'm learning and trying to get better, mistakes are inevitable. I will look at each mistake as an opportunity to learn and grow as I strive for excellence.
- c. I will approach each problem as a challenge-an opportunity to learn and get better as a person and as an athlete.
- d. No matter how bleak the outlook or how difficult the obstacle, I will except the challenged before my best and come up with a strategy that will allow me to be successful.
- e. I take constructive criticism well, using that feedback to make myself a better person and athlete.

6. Reframe Negative Thoughts

- a. I'll concentrate on doing my best right now because I can't change what has happened in the past or what may happen in the future. All I can do is strive for excellence at this moment.
- b. I except what I can't change or control. I can't control what others think of me or how they play, I can't control my God-given ability or how fast I've learned skills. I can't control official's decisions, playing conditions, or lock. I can control my own effort level, attitude, mood, and performance. I'll concentrate on what I can control and not worry about what I cannot control.
- c. Life is often unfair, and that is okay. I will continue to work hard because persistence pays off in the long run.
- d. I can't control what others think and how they behave. People can find fault with even a hall of fame performers. I will strive to please myself and enjoy competing. The person I have to answer to is the one in the mirror.
- e. Playing poorly is disappointing but not awful or unbearable. My life will go on, even if I don't play well. I will try to learn from my mistakes so that I can be more successful in the future.

7. Attribute Success to Hard Work and Failure to Little Effort or the Need to Develop Skills

- a. Working hard and developing my skills will allow me to continue to achieve success as I progress up the competitive ladder.
- b. I know my hard work and consistent practice have paid dividends and allowed me to achieve the success I've had.
- c. This feedback, aka failure, is temporary and can be overcome with hard work and persistence skill development.
- d. All perceived failure is surmountable with enough time, patience, hard work, and careful planning.
- e. When confronted with perceived failure, I focus on the things I can control such as trying harder, getting better prepared mentally, developing my skills more fully, and enjoying the opportunity to test my skills.

Once you have clarified the purpose(s) of your script, select the positive thoughts that are more meaningful and effective for you, or use other one's that empower you

Sample Self-Confidence Self-Talk Script

I don't want to imitate anyone; I want to be the best I can be!

My Strength and Assets

- I am a talented person whose skills and abilities that allowed me to be successful in life
- I have the ability to make myself a better performer and help my team in many ways
- On any given day I have the ability to play with anyone; it's a matter of my commitment to succeed
- Final Thought: I've got the goods!

Goals and How I Will Achieve Them

- My goal is to become the best I am capable of being
- Dreams become reality through hard work and sacrifice
- Give the game the best you have been the best will come back to you
- Final Thought: stay focused and in the present!

My Past Performances and Learning From Them

- I've overcome similar obstacles before and I can do it again
- Failure helps me by making me see where I can improve
- I know it's only a matter of time before my hard work pays off
- Remember all your success in the past and become the player you know you are capable of being
- Final Thought: take the good and the bad and use it to become better!

Quantity and Quality of My Preparation

- I will work as hard or harder than anyone else; when crunch time comes, they will fold and I will stand tall
- I take pride in my work and practice; this will give me the confidence to overcome adversity
- I have prepared myself well maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses
- Final Thought: I am prepared and ready!

Situations Are Challenges, Not Threats

- Everyone encounters failure and adversity; champions rise above adversity and see problems as opportunities for excellence
- I will approach each problem is a challenge - an opportunity to get better as a person and an athlete
- Mistakes will happen and when they do, I will make the best of them and learn from
- Final thought: challenges separate champions from wannabes!

No Negative Thoughts, Only Positive Ones

- Labeling is disabling - don't label yourself or others
- I can't control my opponent or other variables; all I can control is my effort
- Don't feel sorry for yourself. Life could be worse. No complaints!
- Final Thought: resilience is my middle name!

Success Comes From Hard Work

- I know hard-working and consistent practice have paid off and allowed me to achieve success
- I will not let failure to feed me, I will overcome it
- Champions are made, not born!
- Final thought: I'm committed to personal excellence!

The thing that will make me a player is my love for the game.

Worksheet for Reframing Negative Thoughts

Champions reframe situations in ways that motivate them to perform their best. They proactively create a positive mindset that promotes excellence rather than allowing the situation to dictate how they think and feel. For this worksheet, list situations in the box marked “Situations” that interfere with personal excellence, and reframe those situations more constructively by asking yourself questions from the box marked “Reframing Strategies.”

Situations

Situations I dislike or complain about that prevent me from performing at my best.

Reframing Strategies

How can I reframe this situation as a positive challenge?

What are the positives/benefits of this situation?

How might I benefit from this opportunity?

What can I learn from this situation?

Self-Talk Do's and Don'ts

Do's	Don'ts
<i>BEFORE PRACTICE</i>	<i>OR COMPETITION</i>
Focus on positive self perceptions and strengths.	Don't focus on negative self perceptions and weaknesses.
Focus on your effective preparation.	Don't focus on in adequacy of or problems with preparation.
Remind yourself of previous successes.	Avoided thinking about previous failures.
Focus on positive expectations and goals.	Avoid unrealistic expectations and negative goals.
Reframe any irrational beliefs using effective counter arguments.	Don't allow irrational beliefs to go unchallenged.
<i>DURING PRACTICE</i>	<i>OR COMPETITION</i>
Limit thinking and rely on automated skills.	Don't think too much, over analyze, or try to make it happen.
Focus on the present, not the past or future.	Don't dwell on past mistakes or potential future problems.
Focus on process, not product, using effective cue words.	Avoid thinking about the product too much.
Appraise the situation as a challenge, and maintain positive expectations and goals.	Don't appraise the situation as a threat.
Reframe negative thoughts, and use effective problem-solving strategies.	Avoid haphazard reframing or on the systematic problem-solving.
<i>FOLLOWING PRACTICE</i>	<i>OR COMPETITION</i>
Attribute success to internal, controllable factors such as effort and mental preparation that will increase perceived competence.	Don't attribute success to external factors or failures to stable, internal ones that will reduce perceived competence.
Develop positive future expectations and goals, complete with action plans for how to achieve them, and minimize oversights.	Avoid negative expectations and goals.

Mental Strength Plan

Strategies for Developing Mental Strength Preparation Plans

- 1. How will you get focused for practice or competition?**
 - a. What are your goals for this practice or competition? What do you want to accomplish or focus on?
 - b. Do you have a focused keyword or phrase for this event?
 - c. What type of imagery would help you focus better?
- 2. How will you develop a positive mental attitude for practice or competition?**
 - a. How will you keep your goals challenging but realistic?
 - b. Does playing your self-talk script create a strong positive mental attitude (PMA)?
 - c. Do you have PMA keyword or phrase?
 - d. What type of imagery might create a more PMA?
- 3. How will you develop an optimal level of self confidence for practice or competition?**
 - a. How will you use your goals to develop optimal self-confidence?
 - b. Does playing your self-talk script create optimal confidence?
 - c. Do you have a self-confidence key word or phrase?
 - d. What type of imagery helps you create an optimal level of confidence?
- 4. How will you develop optimal arousal for practice or competition?**
 - a. How will you use your relaxation and energization skills to create optimal arousal?
 - b. How would you use your goals to enhance your optimal energy level?
 - c. How helpful is your self-talk script in creating optimal arousal?
 - d. Do you have an optimal energy keyword or phrase?
 - e. What type of imagery helps you achieve optimal arousal?
- 5. How will you develop motivation to push her limits for practice or competition?**
 - a. How will you use your goals to enhance your motivation?
 - b. How helpful is your self-talk script in enhancing your motivation?
 - c. Do you have a motivation keyword or phrase?
 - d. What type of imagery helped to achieve optimal motivation?
- 6. How will you combine this mental warm-up with your physical warm-up?**

Physical and Mental Preparation Plan Development Form

Crucial Steps in Physical Warm-up Routine	Time Required	Concerns	Crucial Steps in Mental Warm-up Routine	Time Required	Concerns	Combined Physical & Mental Warm-up

Use the Physical and Mental Preparation Plan Development to ensure that your performance warm-up routine addresses all aspects of performance readiness and helps create a flow mind-set.

Race Plan Development Form

Race Segment	Race Segment Goals		Cue Words
	Physical	Mental	
Example: Race start	React quickly, stay low and drive hard; be with the leaders out of the blocks	Focus only on the gun; keep it positive; be confident in your start	"Be explosive," "drive low and hard," "I always get a great start"

Plotting physical and mental goals and cues for each segment for the race and creating backup plans for overcoming potential difficulties helps you automate your execution and achieve a flow mind-set.

Pre-Performance Routine Development Form

Identify the steps in your current pre-performance routine and any concerns about those steps. Next, look at the required steps for pre-performance routines. Make any additions of required steps to your current routine. Finally, write out your final pre-performance routine that includes all personal and required steps. Write out each step in your Final Routine in as much detail as possible. Make sure that your new Pre-Performance Routine works for you and is short enough to fit within the time constraints of your sport.

Steps in Current Pre-Performance Routine	Concerns	Required Steps for Pre-Performance Routines	Additions of Required Steps to Routine	Final Routine: Combined Current and Ideal Steps
		Step 1: Relax & remove unwanted tension from performing muscles.		
		Step 2: Use goals & self-talk to promote focus & concentration.		
		Step 3: Adjust arousal to ensure you're in your optimal energy zone.		
		Step 4: Use imagery & positive self-talk to become optimally confident in performing your best		
		Step 5: Develop a positive mental attitude that is stress-free but challenged.		
		Step 6: How will you maximize a highly automated, feeling-oriented performance?		
		Step 7: Streamline your routine to make it quick, effective and consistent to execute.		

You can use the Pre-Performance Routine Development Form to analyze and refine your existing routine.

Interactive Sport Performance Plan Development Form

Predetermined Critical Situations	Situation Goals		Cue Words
	Physical	Mental	
Example: First 3 minuets of the game	Emphasize defense and rebounding to take advantage of high arousal level	Focus on being relaxed but aggressive; try to intimidate opponent physically, keep things simple until in flow of the game	“Be quick and don’t hurry,” “be aggressive and in control,” let the game come to me,” “be unselfish and put the team first.”

Reactions to Good and Bad Performance Trends	Situation Goals		Cue Words
	Physical	Mental	
Example: Opponent reels off 10 straight point	Play under control to reduce turnovers; be more patient to get better shots; increase defensive intensity; put more pressure on opponent’s guards	Focus on increasing energization and motivation; restore confidence and PMA; focus on more physical defense and more patience on offense	“Poise and composure under pressure,” “make the extra pass to get a good shot,” “pressure them into hurrying,” “ball pressure and shoot down the passing lanes”

You can use the Interactive Sport Performance Plan Development Form to set specific goals and cue words critical situations.

Performance Profiling

Performance profiling is a form of assessment that can be employed to discover a player's perceived weaknesses. The process can be employed to evaluate and monitor any aspects that contribute to a player's performance, including physical, psychological, technical and sociological factors. The process has its three main purposes:

- It aids in identifying an appropriate training program
- It helps to maximize the participant's motivation and adherence to the program
- It can help monitor any changes that occur over a given period of time

Performance profiles are documents that are created to highlight what a player perceives as their weakness. The player(s) should be introduced to the idea through a discussion and an explanation of the reasoning and thought behind it. They should also be made aware that this is for their own benefit and that no one else expect the allocated personnel will see the form. (These personnel should be outlined before the assessment is completed). The player must then be completely honest with themselves and the coach when completing the form.

The first step is to devise a list of desired attributes related to the area the coach would like to assess. This list can be created through a brain storming session between coach and player or simply provided to the player by the coach. Although, if it is obtained through a brain storming session the coach can begin to visualize the way their players minds work and also the player feels more involved in the process. The list created can contain any number of attributes or factors but each should be specific to the evaluated area. (It is suggested that the list contains no more than 20-22 attributes). This list is then transferred into a table or circular (figure 1) format, so that the player can complete the assessment.

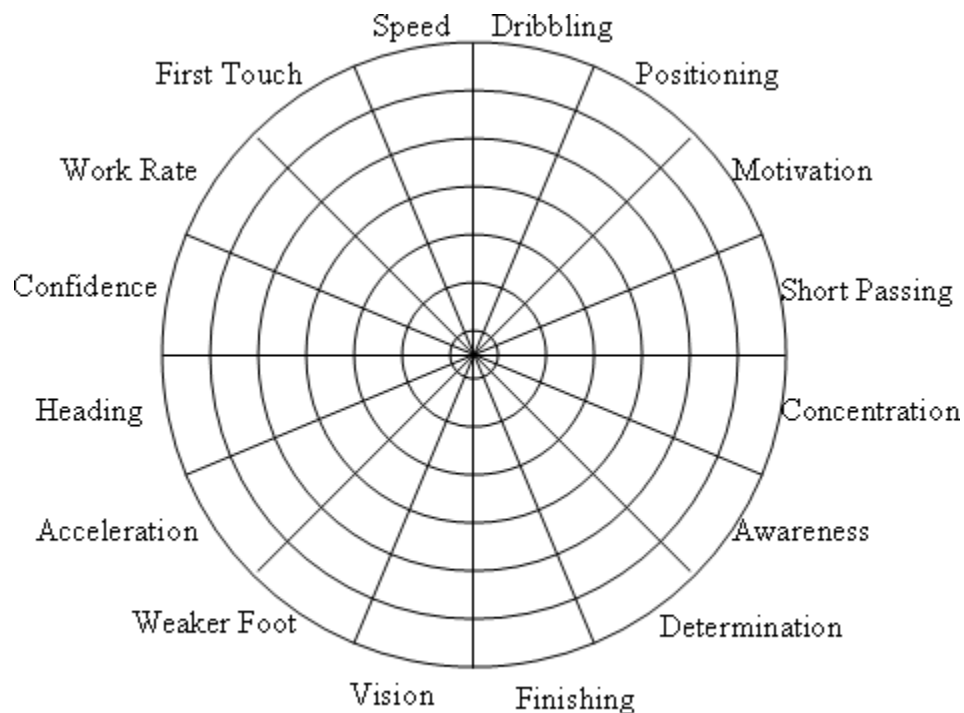


Figure 1: Performance Profile for a Centre Forward

Once the player has the chart they must then assign each attribute a desired level. This level can relate to:

How important that attribute is for their role?

- The ideal standard the attribute should be at
- The standard the current 'best player' is at (either at the club or in the league)
- The standard of the current 'best player' at the club for each attribute
- The standard they have previously been at

The level that the player uses as a benchmark is dependant on the coaches' objectives for the assessment and the desired course of action.

For example if the player has been in poor form then comparing themselves to their best could be the desired result, or another approach could be that the player is required to compare themselves against the divisions or teams top player. The level is then marked out on each of the attributes. For the example below the performance profile was completed by a player on the fringes of playing for a first team. They were then required to compare themselves to the first choice centre forward. Therefore figure 2 shows the player's perceived ability of the first choice centre forward.

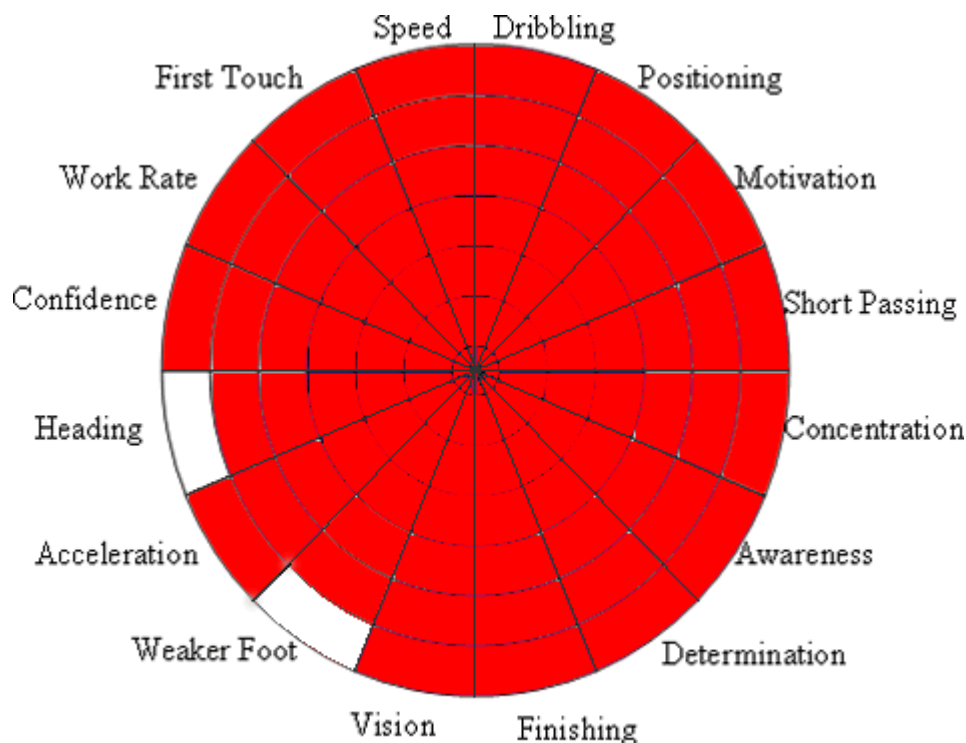


Figure 2: Performance Profile for a Centre Forward - Desired Requirements

Once the player has completed the chart for their benchmark target, they must then fill in each attribute with a rating for their own ability (at that present time). In the example provided the centre forward was then asked to complete the chart, comparing how good they were compared to the first choice centre forward.

The outcome is shown in figure 3 below.

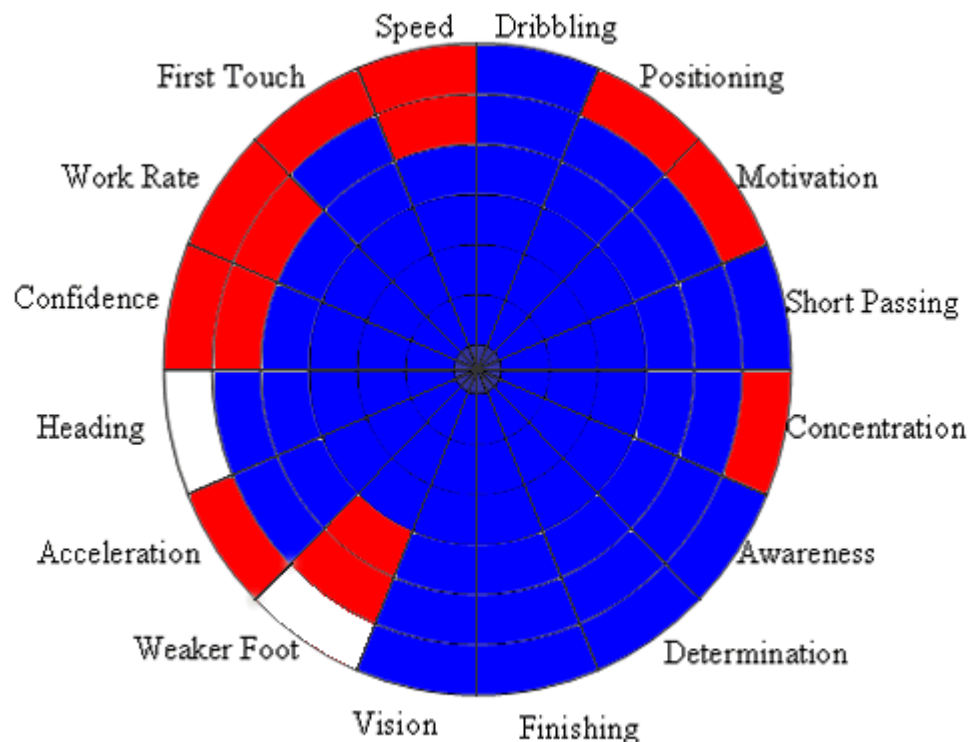


Figure 3: Performance Profile for a Centre Forward actual present level

The fully completed chart can then be used to highlight the areas that the player must improve upon if they are to reach their desired level and also allows the coach to be conscious of how the player perceives themselves. The more space between the desired and actual levels indicates the attributes that require a greater improvement.

In the example the fringe first team centre forward now has areas to work upon to obtain the same standard as their team mate, especially their weaker foot, confidence, speed and work rate. Once the results are analyzed the coach can then construct a training program that can be used by the player to improve the required areas, so that their performance reaches their desired standard.

Generally the performance profile is completed by the player about themselves. However it is possible for the coach to complete one on the player as well so a comparison can occur. This will show any major discrepancies that the player and coach may have regarding the players ability, which in turn can highlight any unwarranted arrogance, cockiness and ego, or even any insecurity the player may possess within their game.

Another use for performance profiling can be seen when implemented with a team as a whole. The players could each complete a chart based upon the general state of the team, to include such factors as team spirit, confidence, work rate, attacking and defending qualities etc. This would then allow the coach the ability to evaluate how the players perceive the current condition of the team, compared to how it has been or the other teams in the league.

Performance profiling can be a very useful tool to help the planning and monitoring of player's training program. However, they are heavily based on subjective views so results may vary greatly. It is for that reason training program should therefore not be created based on these results alone, as players may over- or under-estimate their own strengths and weaknesses.

The most fundamentally crucial element of the whole process is to ensure that the player completing it is totally honest with themselves and their answers, and not just filling out what they think their coach wants to see.

References:

Figure .1. Adapted from:

Butler, R J (1996). Sport Psychology in Action. Butterworth-Heinemann Ltd.

Flow Mind-Set

Practice Flow Mind-Set Assessment Form - Rating from 1 -10, 10 being best -

Mind-Set	M	T	W	Th	F	Game	Perf. Avg.	If Rating < 7
Positive Mental Attitude (PMA)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	1. Self-talk script or tape
Pre-practice PMA								2. Identify negative thoughts & use counterargument
Mid-practice PMA								3. Imagery
Self-Confidence (SC)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	If Rating < 7
Pre-practice self-confidence								1. Goal setting
Mid-practice self-confidence								2. Self-Talk
								3. Imagery
Focus/Concentration (FOC)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	If Rating < 7
Pre-practice concentration								1. Review plans
Mid-practice concentration								2. Focus on goals
								3. Adjust OAL
Commitment to push limits (COM)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	If Rating < 7
Pre-practice commitment								1. Review goals
Mid-practice commitment								2. Self-talk
								3. Imagery
Optimal arousal level (OAL)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	If Rating > or < 5
Pre-practice OAL								1. < 5 use rapid energization
Mid-practice OAL								2. > 5 use rapid relaxation
Overall Performance (PERF)								

You can use this form to track your pre and mid practice levels of mental strength skills

Competitive Flow Mind-Set Assessment Form - Rating from 1 -10, 10 being best -

Mind-Set	M	T	W	Th	F	Game	Perf. Avg.	If Rating < 7
Positive Mental Attitude (PMA)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	1. Self-talk script or tape
Pre-practice PMA								2. Identify negative thoughts & use counterargument
Mid-practice PMA								3. Imagery
Self-Confidence (SC)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	If Rating < 7
Pre-practice self-confidence								1. Goal setting
Mid-practice self-confidence								2. Self-Talk
								3. Imagery
Focus/Concentration (FOC)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	If Rating < 7
Pre-practice concentration								1. Review plans
Mid-practice concentration								2. Focus on goals
								3. Adjust OAL
Commitment to push limits (COM)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	If Rating < 7
Pre-practice commitment								1. Review goals
Mid-practice commitment								2. Self-talk
								3. Imagery
Optimal arousal level (OAL)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	If Rating > or < 5
Pre-practice OAL								1. < 5 use rapid energization
Mid-practice OAL								2. > 5 use rapid relaxation
Overall Performance (PERF)								

You can use this form to track your pre and mid practice levels of mental strength skills

Sharpen Your Focus

Many athletes report that the difficulty of learning mental strength skills or strategies is that they are more abstract and less concrete than practicing physical skills or drills. If you want to improve your tennis serve, for example, you go to the court and practice drills that your instructor has taught you to improve your serving action.

When learning mental game strategies, you first have to understand the concepts such as how to focus, what you need to focus on, and how to refocus when distracted. However, this conceptual type of learning is only one part of the learning process when it comes to applying it to your performance. You must be able to apply the skills in a meaningful way to your sports performance consistently. Even then, you have no guarantee that you will improve your concentration in competition or practice.

Several factors can intervene between the conceptual phase of learning and the application of the concepts to your performance. You may understand the concepts well, but then are unable to use them in competition. For example, the pressure of crunch time may cause you to tighten up and not focus on the proper performance cues. Or you may become physically tired at the end of a 5-hour golf round and not have the energy to concentrate your best.

What other mental game factors can interfere with your ability to apply focusing strategies to competition even when you fully understand the concepts?

- Anxiety and fear of failure
- Perfectionism or trying to perform perfectly
- Lack of intensity or motivation
- Loss of focus after making a mistake
- Obsessed with results or outcomes
- Social approval or worry about what other think
- Inability to concentration for long periods
- Difficulty to get refocused after a break in play
- Inability to concentration with outside or external distractions (fans at the game)
- Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or another disorder that affects concentration
- A problem or crisis in your life

Do Concentration Drills Work?

I often get asked by coaches and athletes about “drills” they can use to improve concentration. My philosophy about mental strength and focusing skills is not based on teaching athletes concentration drills per se. I believe that most athletes, who do not have ADD or another disorder that affect concentration, know how to concentrate and can concentrate well at certain times.

However, your powers of concentration are often taxed when you are asked to perform in adverse conditions when many distractions are competing for your attention.

As I discussed above, there are many factors that can interfere with your ability to fully concentration. So ultimately your focus of attention can become misplaced on the wrong cues or become taxed by many factors beyond your control.

The ability to concentrate includes several important elements:

1. The ability to identify relevant performance cues and task-irrelevant information in your sport.
2. The ability to become fully immersed in the important performance cues for successful execution.
3. The ability to use refocusing skills when you recognize that you are distracted.
4. The ability to shift focus from broad to narrow and narrow to broad.
5. The ability to focus after long periods of downtime.
6. Staying highly focused during long performances.

Although I subscribe to teaching the above focusing strategies, I do believe there is value in learning and practicing concentration skills to help you improve the above abilities. If you want to improve concentration, the best option is to learn the above six focusing abilities. However, many athletes often ask about concentration “drills” they can learn to improve focus.

Do you think Drew Brees or Wayne Gretzky used “drills” to develop their concentration or did they discipline themselves to focus on what was important during practice and competition? Maybe both, but I would bet the later is most likely. Still, if you want to improve your focus in practice with structured concentration exercises, you should try to master the following simple exercises.

Tighten Your Focus Drill

Select a small object like an apple, golf ball or tennis ball. Place the golf ball on a desk in front of you. The goal is to see how long you can visually study the object without becoming distracted or have your mind wander from the ball. If a thought unrelated to the ball pops into your head, try to let it pass and focus back on the ball.

This simple drill tests the intensity of focus and gives you an awareness of how extraneous thoughts can come into your mind. You may find that you can only do this for a few seconds before you are interrupted by other thoughts unrelated to the object of attention. This requires that you become aware of the extraneous thoughts when they occur and refocus on the ball.

Purposeful Distraction Drill

You will need a partner to do this drill or another source of distraction, such as an audio recording. The goal is to perform a skill in your sport you do every day. For example, if you play golf, another person tries to distract you on purpose while you try to make a putt. A friend, instructor, or parent will need to do his best to distract you by saying things such as, “don’t miss the putt” or “if you miss, you’ll lose the match.” Your goal is to pay attention to performing the task, while ignoring the external distraction. This is one of the methods Earl Woods, Tiger’s father, used to train Tiger to concentration with distractions.

Mental Rehearsal or Imagery Drill

If you tried visualization or mental rehearsal in the past, you have already practiced concentrating intensely. Visualizing a successful play in hockey can only be done with intense concentration. Mental rehearsal might be the most applicable concentration exercise in a practice setting.

Begin by picking a task in your sport that you can't practice often or are limited in your practice. Skydivers, for example, need to rely heavily on their mental imagery skills to learn maneuvers during ground training due the expense of practicing in the air.

The goal with this drill is to visualize your performance from a first person perspective (like you are actually performing the skill rather than watching yourself such as when you watch a video). This is when you want to keep focused while visualizing your sport. You can take it a step further and practice your refocusing skills within your imagery.

Concentration Grid

The concentration grid is a drill to help you improve your ability to visually scan in a given time. The grid comprises of a 10-by-10 blocks containing two digit numbers ranging from 00 to 40. The goal of this drill is to put a slash through as many double digit numbers as possible in a given time. You must start with the 00 double digit and work through the numbers in sequence. For example, 00, 01, 02, 03.... You should give yourself 1 minute time trials. When the time is up count the amount of numbers you have managed to score through.

You might want to do this drill with a partner and compare your scores. When commencing a new time trail start with the number directly after the last number used in your previous trial. Those who can't disregard everything but the task at hand do poorly. If you have the ability to concentrate, scan and store the relevant cues you will normally have a score in the high 20"s or 30"s.

Directions: Beginning with the number 01, put a slash (/) through each number in the proper sequence until you reach the number 40. Time how long it takes you to complete the exercise with and without distraction or while doing another activity simultaneously.

This is a brief, yet very powerful, section. Its' purpose is to test and develop your concentration. Your ability to concentrate intently on a given task is a doorway to the state of "flow". The very act of placing your attention on a single moment/object, at the exclusion of everything else, is itself a heightened state of awareness.

This isolation of attention magnifies the state you are in and intensifies it. Exactly what creates optimal performance states. This is the foundation of personal excellence in your game. Work with this *simple* test and your ability to concentrate will expand proportionately. Well, it is simple but it's definitely not easy!

Practice with this until you reach a high degree of proficiency. I assure you this will take time but the payoff will be noticeable.

The following process is designed to test and increase your focus. It is a great way to test yourself as to how developed your attention is relative to other peak performers. On the following page you'll find a grid filled with numbers beginning with 00 and going to 99. What you'll do is begin crossing off the numbers in the grid starting at 00 and continuing in order until you are finished with crossing off number 99.

The numbers are arranged randomly.

Yet you have only "one minute"! So grab your watch and time yourself. I'll show you what top performers results are later. I want you to focus on your own efforts first before comparing your results with them.

Print several copies of the number grid for your use. Then grab a pencil. After you've used a sheet once, toss it away and use a fresh sheet with each subsequent test.

Concentration is a mental game skill that is acquired with practice.

Make the effort to improve your scores on this grid and you will definitely experience increased attention, focus and reduced mental distractions.

Time yourself and make sure to stop at exactly 1 minute. Then count how many numbers you were able to cross off the grid, in order, starting with 00 through to 99.

Concentration Grid

Directions: Beginning with the number 01, put a slash (/) through each number in the proper sequence until you reach the number 40. Time how long it takes you to complete the exercise with and without distraction or while doing another activity simultaneously.

84	27	51	78	59	52	13	85	61	55
28	60	92	04	97	90	31	57	29	33
32	96	65	39	80	77	49	86	18	70
76	87	71	95	98	81	01	46	88	00
48	82	89	47	35	17	10	42	62	34
44	67	93	11	07	43	72	94	69	56
53	79	05	22	54	74	58	14	91	02
06	68	99	75	26	15	41	66	20	40
50	09	64	08	38	30	36	45	83	24
03	73	21	23	16	37	25	19	12	63

Individuals with a high degree of concentration completed upwards of 30 numbers in one minute. Impressive to say the least. The “average” number of completions for top performers was around 20.

Don't feel bad if your numbers don't match theirs. These are the best of the best! Keep practicing. Then set the entire exercise aside for several days to a week.

Return to it and do it fresh with no “memory” of any number placement patterns.

You don't want to attempt to try and memorize “where” each number was the last time you did it in order to speed the process up.

Trigger Word Drill

This drill will help you apply self-talk to help you stay focused on different tasks in your sport. The goal of this exercise is to help you stay focused in the moment.

Firstly, select 3 tasks in your sport. When you have done this, select a word or short phrase that describes the correct action in each. For example, in a tennis serve you might select “Timing”, for a backhand return “follow through”, and for return of serve “stay low” to help you stay balanced.

You should try and use each of these words or phrases before the execution of a task. When you have mastered you cue word statement for each task move on and select a new statement to help you focus on a different aspect of the same task. You might also want to change the task and develop new cue word statements.

Turning Failure into Success Drill

This is an ideal drill for staying focused on the task when adversity strikes. I want you to use this drill after making a mistake or error in your sport.

There is a three step process to this refocusing drill.

- First, when you commit an error think of a short phrase to define the error you made in execution. For example, after hitting an unsuccessful sand shot in golf you might say “I need to stay more balanced”.
- Secondly, visualize executing the successful outcome you desired.
- Thirdly, now move your mind to the next shot and visualize the successful outcome that you will obtain on the next shot.

This drill helps you let go of errors and not become distracted or lose your focus. It will reinforce the successful actions needed for execution and keep you on task for your next play.

Practice with Competitive Distractions

In 1984 Olympics, Peter Vidmar won a gold medal in gymnastics on the pommel horse and a silver medal in the all around. He was a big advocate of a concept called specificity practice or training. This means that you should practice in the conditions you will perform – with all the common distractions you will have to cope with in competition.

In the UCLA during practice, Vidmar and his teammates would do dress rehearsals. They played crowd noise, gathered people around to watch, used mock judges, and then performed their routines just like they were in competing. In this fashion, they were preparing to focus with the ordinary distractions they will face in competition. This strategy should be a normal part of your practice routines. Collegiate coaches call this concept doing “pressure sets” to get acclimated to the distractions in a real meet.

As an example, in gymnastic you may play a tape recorder at maximum volume of a crowd cheering and try and perform your routines. You can wear the normal competitive outfit you will need to perform with. You can ask other team members to watch your perform your routine. You could have persons sitting at a judging table and judge your routines. You want to set up the practice environment to match the circumstances of competition – as close as you can.

If you can’t do this in your sport, the next best option is imagine being in competition and performing with all the normal distractions and hoopla you will face. For example, many of my golfing students imagine themselves trying to make a putt on the last hole of the tournament to win the club championship or the US open, depending on your level.

Wrap-Up

Now that you have learned your concentration drills your goal is to practice these drills everyday. To get the most improvement from the drills I recommend that you practice one or two of the drills 10-15 minutes a day.

If you are having trouble performing one of the drills outlined here, do not give up – continue to practice you're the drill until you have mastered it. Furthermore, you might want to customize the concentration drills to suit your sport. There are many variations for each drill and I would encourage you to experiment with these.

The outcome of the exercise is to test your concentration and focus.
Ultimately they will both improve.

Mental drills that increase your acuity are a useful addition to your mental game arsenal. Another step along the road toward personal mental game mastery...

Testing Your Learning Style

Below are two simple tests to help you determine your preferred style of imagery. Some athletes already know their ideal pre-shot images for performance while other athletes do not know or have considered evaluation of their imagery style. These athletes may assume they are visual performers, but do better with kinesthetic images or vice versa.

Learning Preference Style (LPS)

Directions: Please respond to the following questions with true or false below. Select true (most like me) or false (least like me) next to each statement. Please be as honest as possible.

1. When I dream about my sport, I see mostly pictures in my mind. ____
2. I always recall a feeling of a movement or skill before I perform it. ____
3. When thinking about past play, I mostly see pictures in my head. ____
4. A demonstration of a new sports skill is the best way for me to learn it. ____
5. A coach helping me to feel the motion of a new skill is the best way for me to learn it. ____
6. I recall how the skill or movement should sound before I execute it. ____
7. I learn better by performing a skill rather than a coach telling me how to do it. ____
8. When I perform, I see only images or pictures in my head. ____
9. When I perform, I cannot see pictures in my head. ____
10. I prefer to see my performance on video to make corrections. ____
11. I prefer my coach to tell me how to execute a skill instead of show me. ____
12. I use cue words such as "push" or "tempo" to help me perform. ____

LPS Results:

- If you answered true to statements 1, 3, 8 & 10, then you are likely a predominately visual performer and learner. You should use visual images in your routine to help pre-program your performance.
- If you answered true to any of statements 2, 5, 7, & 9 then you are likely a predominately kinesthetic or feel-oriented performer and learner. You should use feeling images in your routines to help pre-program your performance.
- If you answered true to any of statements 6, 11, 12 then you are likely a predominately auditory performer and learner. You should use auditory images or cue words in your routines to help pre-program your performance.

Ranking Your Imagery Style

Most likely, you will apply a variety of sensations and imagery styles to your program during the routine, but will have one dominate style. Below is a table that contains three styles or preferences. Using the results from the IPQ test, please rank (from 1-3) your preferred imagery styles based on most dominant to least dominant:

Ranking Your Imagery Preference

Imagery	Descriptors	Rank
Visual Style	See, observe, look, visualize, see in your mind's eye, picture of the target in your mind, and see how the skill should look	
Kinesthetic Style	Feel, do, experience, stimulate, imagine the movement, feel tempo or balance.	
Auditory Style	Listen, hear, cadence, imagine the sound, focus on cue words to trigger movements.	

If you are still unsure about your imagery style, it may require that you “test” out different imagery styles in practice when you are performing. Try many different images to execute a motor skill to decide your dominant imagery style.

Another test to determine your dominant style is to close her eyes and experience yourself performing in practice. For example, if you're a golfer, imagine hitting shots on the practice range. Then, think about the images you experienced during this short exercise.

Below is a similar test you can try.

Imagery Style Test

1. Recall a recent performance or competition. Try to experience yourself at that same event as if you are actually there again. First, lie down and take a few deep breaths to relax and concentrate. Think about recent performance and recall it in as much detail as possible. Engage the same thoughts, images, sounds, and feelings as if you are performing again.
2. Write one or two paragraphs about your recall of this event. Describe the images, pictures, or feelings you were able to engage with during this exercise.
3. The last step is to review the terminology you used to describe this performance based on the table above. This will give you clues as to the style of images you prefer in your performance. For example, if you mostly recalled images of the feeling of the performance and used words such as “felt” or “feel,” then you are likely a kinesthetic performer.

Confidence – Expectation

This was discussed in Warrior Mind Training Playbook for Sport and thought it would be useful to include it again in the workbook

Three Steps in the Confidence- Expectation Formula Are:

1. Identify strict, unrealistic expectations that affect your confidence negatively.
2. Understand how to harness the power of confidence and how confidence differs from expectations
3. Replace expectations with manageable objectives. Focus on manageable objectives or what I call mini-goals or process goals, but do not turn them into expectations.

Step 1: Identify Your Own Limiting Expectations

This is the most difficult task for many athletes because expectations have become a natural part of their mental game and performance. When I talk about expectations, I refer to the strict demands you place on your performance. Instead of generating confidence, expectations become a desperate need for athletes – “I MUST finish in the top 10 this week, or the race is a failure.” If you are familiar with my philosophy about mental coaching, you know that focusing on results is not the best mindset for peak performance.

Below are some signs to help identify strict expectations

- Your “goals” focus on outcomes or results only.
- You constantly judge your performance based on personal standards.
- You become upset when you do not perform up to your own standards.
- You lose confidence when you do not achieve your personal standards.
- You expect to attain certain game statistics during your performance.
- On the occasion you perform up to your own standards, you feel no reward from this because you were “supposed to” perform that well.

Below are a few questions you can ask yourself to flush out any expectations:

- What results do you demand of yourself before the competition even starts?
- What personal statistics, such as points per game, do you feel you should achieve based on past performances, and would you be upset or frustrated if you did not reach these stats?
- Do you maintain unrealistic “goals” for your performance before competition? In which areas do you have to be perfect?
- Do you try to live up to other people’s expectations? What expectations do you adopt or take on from others – parents, coaches, or teammates?
- Do expectations about your scoring (or your team’s scoring) limit you when you exceed these expectations, keeping you stuck in a comfort zone?
- Do you generalize today about how you SHOULD perform based on past performances?
- Do you engage in name-calling with yourself or maintain negative personal descriptions such as “I’m a choker,” which influence your confidence?
- Are you easily frustrated when you don’t perform up to your minimum personal standards? What are the ways you think you should perform?
- Do you dwell and beat yourself up about how badly you performed?
- Do you have sudden temper tantrums over small errors during competition?

Step 2: Perform with Confidence - not Expectation

A priority for your mental game is to focus all your energy on the process, also called the present moment, instead of outcomes or results. Focusing on results only serves to set expectations on your performance. Process goals or what I call manageable objectives help you focus attention on execution only, if applied correctly.

The next step is to understand confidence and how this differs in its application to your performance. Confidence is a belief in your ability to execute a task at the most specific level. Confidence can also be the general belief in your ability to win or be successful.

How does confidence differ from expectation?

- Confidence precedes your performance or execution.
- Confidence is not judgmental about how well or poorly you are performing.
- Confidence thrives on momentum and good performance.
- Confidence is focused on the present moment and your ability to execute instead of the desire for obtaining outcomes or final results.
- Confidence is rational and built from training and past performances, expectations are usually irrational and outcome focused.
- Expectations chase results, positive results lead to confidence.

Step 3: Replace Expectations with Process Goals

What are the steps for establishing process goals?

1. Decide which aspects of your performance you want to improve or focus on that day.
2. Set one or two process goals that will help you focus on execution.
3. If you recognize that you are getting ahead of yourself or thinking about results or focused on expectation, refocus on your process goals.

What are examples of process goals?

- Golf: Pick a specific target on every shot
- Tennis: Increase first serve percentage
- Hockey: Focus on quality back checking
- Football: Commit to the play call
- Swimming: Improve rhythm in the pool

I think you get the idea now. Process goals focus on the small tasks you need to do in the present moment that will help you perform well. The purpose of process goals is to help you become immersed in the present moment only and not really for the benefit of reaching small goals.

Do not evaluate or judge if you are achieving your process goals! Although it's rewarding to reach your goals, I don't want you to assess or judge whether you're on track because they will turn into expectations in this case. If you do, you are not focused on the process. Later, after the competition ends, you can assess how well you did with your process goals. In other words, reflect and evaluate on your performance after game time not during the game.

Focus

Mental Strength Strategies for Zone Concentration

There are six seconds left in the game and your team is trailing by one point. You are on the foul line with one more shot to tie the game. The referee tosses you the ball; you grab it and bounce it just like you do in your normal free throw routine. You eye your target, preparing to hear the “swoosh” as the ball glides through the net.

But, for just a split second, your eyes stray from the target and you notice someone behind the hoop waving a banner for the opposing team. As you stroke the ball, you think: “I can’t stop now—I’ll look silly.” So, you release the ball. And, as if it is traveling in slow motion, you watch as it hits the rim and bounces away from the basket. Instead of tying the game, your team lost by a single point.

“The formula for success is simple: practice and more concentration.” ~ Babe Didrikson Zaharias

Focus in sports is critical to a quality performance. In this scenario, the player was confident and ready to embrace the challenge despite the pressure to win. He did everything as he would normally do in a game—he had a routine, a focal point and a dedication to his sport through practice.

But, all it took was a split second distraction for him to lose his focus at the wrong time.

The result?

He missed a free throw that would have tied the game.

The ability to concentrate in the present and keep focused on the task is very important to achieve peak performance in any sport. In the 2-3 hours of competition an athlete will switch his or her concentration on and off repeatedly with the ebb and flow of the game.

Turning on and off concentration makes it more difficult to get into a flow.

The end result is a performance that is less than the actual capabilities of the athlete.

Peak performing athletes have learned to master the art of focus to develop total concentration to maximize their performance. Total concentration occurs when an athlete becomes totally involved in the task, feels that time is suspended, and loses the sense of being separate from his/her surroundings. Movie-makers have long capitalized on this feeling in plot lines centering on the outcome of a sports play by allowing you, the observer, to see the play in slow motion, with the muting of cheering crowds or other distractions.

An athlete’s focus and the ability to control the direction of the focus may be the single most important mental skill, second only to confidence. For most athletes struggling with focus, their ability to concentrate is likely what is hindering performance. If doubts or negative thoughts during a game/match run rampant in the mind of an athlete, this can have a negative impact on self-confidence and ultimately on performance.

The goal here is to teach you the skills to build your concentration for competition by learning how to master concentration, identifying what is important to focus on and how to refocus when you get off-task or become distracted.

In the athletic world, we commonly refer to highly focused concentration as “the zone.”

The below is a list of how athletes describe the feeling of total focus.

Athlete Descriptions of a Focused State:

- In the bubble
- The here and now
- A present focus
- Totally absorbed
- Immersed
- Process focused
- On autopilot
- Flowing
- My whole world
- Clicked in
- Switched on
- Right here
- In the zone

Entering “the zone” is what differentiates good athletes from great ones. There are many methods and drills to increase your concentration skills to enter the zone. The key is to not only know how to enter the zone, but to learn how to enter it faster and stay there once you’re in it.

Most athletes at one time get distracted, are unable to keep focused, or sometimes misplace their focus during competition. I want you to understand that you can’t be perfect with your focus all the time.

The goal here is to help you focus better more of the time and understand when you need to refocus. Instead of teaching you the concentration drills to improve your focus, my goal is to teach you to focus on what is relevant in your sport and how to refocus when you get distracted. Let’s start at the beginning by defining concentration. (I use focus and concentration interchangeably.) One definition of concentration as:

“The ability to immerse yourself in task-relevant cues that allow you to execute a skill while staying grounded in the present moment. Concentration also includes the ability to not attend to distractions or non-relevant thoughts and refocus when distracted.”

The common dictionary definition of concentration is:

“The act or process of concentrating, especially the fixing of close, undivided attention.”

Looking at the definitions of concentration, you can see that a keen focus has five basic elements:

1. The ability to direct attention to a relevant object, thought, or feeling
2. A present tense orientation
3. The ability to deflect or not attend to distractions, irrelevant thoughts
4. The ability to refocus on the relevant cues when distracted
5. The ability to fix or narrow attention

When athletes describe a total focus during competition, they often talk about being “in the zone”. Research into “the zone” has revealed that a focused state of concentration is definitely a huge key to accessing the zone and in fact, it may be a prerequisite.

Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (Dr. C), a psychologist at the University of Chicago, has studied the phenomenon of zone focus or "flow" throughout his career. “Flow” is the zone state in limited form, but has the same attention characteristics. You can think of “flow” as a sample state of entering the zone that leads to optimum performance.

Dr. C studied a variety of athletes--basketball players, dancers, rock climbers, chess players, factory workers and other performers--to understand why people enjoy activities even when there are no inherent rewards present. He hypothesized that when people become fully absorbed in an activity, they reach a state of flow.

Based upon his research, Dr. C theorized that four elements must be present to get into the flow state:

1. The presence of a challenging activity
2. The perception that your skills match the challenge
3. Clear goals
4. The availability of instant feedback concerning your performance

What Dr. C concluded was that when these elements are present, an "order in consciousness" occurs. And, it is this phenomenon that helps people immerse themselves in an activity and have fun doing it.

We certainly know that all four elements of concentration are present in sports. First, any sport is challenging by its very definition. Second, sports usually match the skills of individuals or teams in a competitive environment. Third, the goals of sports are clear—to hit a jump shot or sink a ten foot putt. Lastly, because you get instant feedback related to your performance, that is, whether or not you miss the basket or sink the putt.

The purpose of this section is to give you practical information that you can apply to your sport performance immediately. But, in order to reap the rewards of great performance, you must apply my strategies in both practice and competition.

Ok, let's get started!

The Positive Side Effects of a Zone Focus

No matter how great you are as an athlete, you will face challenges. But, if you are able to master the skill of focus or concentration, you can buffer yourself from many of the obstacles that may adversely impact your performance. I often solve many of my student's challenges by helping them identify priorities (to determine what they **should** be focusing on) and how to re-focus (to overcome adversity in their games.)

“I remember my first Olympic race. I skated out to the starting line as they announced my name. I never saw so many people at a competition nor had I ever heard a roar of cheers like that before! I smiled; I looked up into the crowd and thought, "Wow! I'm at the Olympics!" That's when I lost my focus. The gun went off before I knew it and the race did not flow like it was supposed to. I had to work hard. I felt uneasy, nervous. I was able to pull it together, but I sure learned from then on the importance of staying focused.” - Cathy Turner, Olympic skater

Here are some examples of how to apply focusing skills to other challenges:

1. Confidence Enhancement. What thoughts and beliefs will help you build and keep your confidence under competitive pressure? The first step toward building confidence is being able to identify when you are having doubts about your performance and learning how to tune out doubtful thoughts.

2. Emotional Control. You can learn to deal with the frustration associated with setbacks and mistakes by using thought and focus control. For example, boil down frustration to one word--dwelling. Most athletes get frustrated and remain so because they dwell on the past. (For example: “Last time I was up at bat in this arena, I struck out. I’m afraid I’ll do that this time around.”) Again, we can agree that this is partly a focus issue to which you need to shift attention from the past and into the present.

3. Preparatory Routines. Developing routines in sports helps you focus on the right areas to prepare for execution of a self-paced motor skill. (For example: a basketball player uses a certain routine to prepare for the upcoming free-throw. He determines when to take the shot.) A routine can help you maintain a process focus on the ingredients of the task—and that is a bonus.

4. Changing Unwanted Expectations. Again, focus comes into play with helping you identify faulty expectations and beliefs and working to change the some unhealthy expectations by focusing on other areas that are more important and which lead to better outcomes. For example:

An unhealthy belief is:

“I tend to strike out when the bases are loaded.”

A healthy belief is:

“I know I can get on base.”

Therefore, what you choose to focus on is very important to solving a number of issues.

Other mental abilities (or lack of) can also influence one’s level of focus. For example, if a tennis player loses confidence and tanks a set in tennis, her focus obviously will suffer for the rest of the match. These factors may influence focus.

One factor is your level of activation or intensity (called physiological arousal). In most sports, your attention improves as you “get psyched” and into the game or performance.

However, few athletes realize that you can actually over-stimulate your intensity, get over-excited and adversely impact your ability to focus. Events outside of a sport, such as challenges in your business, academic or personal life can also influence your ability to focus fully in practice and competition.

The Ins and Outs of Concentration

In 1992, Robert Nideffer, a pioneer in sports psychology, studied how focus and attention changes during athletic performance. He hypothesized that focus of attention varies along two basic dimensions—breadth of attention and internal/external focus.

The first dimension, the breadth of attention, is based upon how broad or narrow your attention is focused. To better understand this dimension, think of your attention as camera lens. You can widen the lens (your attention) to see a broader view of an entire defensive formation or you can focus the lens (your attention) to see a more narrow view of one defensive player at a time.

The second dimension is internal and external focus. This implies that the mind can focus on internal feelings and images (e.g. “I am afraid to miss my free throw”) or external events to stimuli (e.g. a fan for the competing team waving a banner) Nideffer theorized that within the two dimensions, there are four quadrants of attentional focus:

- Broad-external focus: Used to assess what is going on in your environment around you. (Example: A soccer player checking out the defensive formation of the opposing team.)
- Broad-internal focus: Used to solve problems, make decisions, develop goals and anticipate the competition. (Example: A basketball player anticipating when or where his opponent will shoot the ball.)
- Narrow internal focus: Used to organize information and mentally rehearse a sports skill. (Example: A golfer feeling a shot before he or she hits it.)
- Narrow-external focus: Used to perform and react. This is the focus required to enter the zone. (Example: A baseball player reacting to a pitched ball.)

Nideffer states that an athlete’s focus will shift between these four quadrants depending on the requirements of the task. Thus, having the right type of focus requires that you develop the ability to shift your attention in response to the changing elements in your performance. While complicated, concentration does tend to shift during any athletic performance.

Most athletes who perform well focus on the competitive arena. Athletes in the zone maintain a narrow external focus of attention during their performance. An example would be a tennis player narrowing his vision on the ball as it crosses the net and reacting to the speed, direction, and height of the ball. Thinking about the previous shot is a distraction and does not help the tennis player react to the current serve or volley. Also, focusing on who is watching the match does not help the player hit the current shot successfully.

Six Steps to Entering the Concentrations Zone

In a focused state like the zone, you may feel as if performance is effortless and totally automatic. In fact, many athletes who are in the zone may have only a vague recollection of the event that precipitated the win or high placement in competition. Well-learned skills, such as a baseball swing, become automatic and effortless to perform with lots of practice. Most athletes in the zone describe this as playing as if on autopilot or instinct, or easy, free, and requiring no conscious thought.

As can be noted, a zone focus requires that you have a proficiency of the basic motor skills required in your sport to the point where they feel natural and automatic. By mastering the basic physical skills, your mind can focus on the pitch rather than the “how to” of the swing; to focus on the target rather than the golf swing; or to focus on the arrows on the lane instead of the ball toss. All of this supports the concept that you need to have a narrow external focus to enter the zone.

Step 1: Understanding a Process Focus

The basic and most important principle in focus is that ability to focus on the process in the present (here and now.) However, it is not as easy as may be implied.

High level performance flows from the athlete’s ability to stay grounded in execution. This means limiting the attention field to the requirements or ingredients that allow you to execute a play, run, swing, or performance.

An offensive lineman, for example, has specific “cues” he must attend to during a down in football. Below is an example of a few attentional cues a lineman might focus on to stay grounded in the task of blocking:

- Assess the tendencies of defense in this situation
- Play Call
- Visualize or feel the play according to play called
- Recognize the front of the defense
- Anticipate slants, stunts and audible calls
- Positive self talk
- Rehearse the play
- Set up or stance
- Snap Count
- React to the snap

“Cues” are where you begin the zone focus training. Your first task is to identify what the important “focal cues” (also called, “task-relevant cues”) are for your sport. These are the thoughts, images, feelings, targets, external stimuli, etc. that should fully occupy your mind during execution. Many coaches do not understand this basic principle and this is reflected when he/she doesn’t tell you exactly what to cue in on.

For example, if a coach says: “Just concentrate harder, Tom!” He thinks you are not focused, but he doesn’t tell you exactly what to cue on and when. It would be more helpful if he stated, “Tom, you’re not reacting to the snap.” Then, you would know that your cue is to focus on the snap, right?

By providing more specific information, the more applicable the information is to refining focus. In addition to uncovering focal cues, I also help athletes identify what irrelevant distractions (bad cues) they should avoid to prevent them from losing concentration.

Irrelevant distractions that occupy the mind can often go unchecked to the extent that an athlete may feel as though these distractions are just part of his or her sport performance. In reality, however, performance is adversely impacted simply by the athlete’s inability to recognize the cues that are prohibiting concentration.

Dr. Ken Ravizza, always promoted the importance of awareness. In the above case, the awareness would be that you are distracted or connecting with the wrong cues. Realizing that you are concentrating on “bad” cues through awareness is the first step in making the necessary adjustments.

As humans, we are constantly bombarded with various stimuli (both internal and from our external environment). Determining what stimuli we respond to is a selective act of our attention. Selective attention is what helps us narrow our focus and allows us to filter out much of the unwanted or unnecessary stimuli at an unconscious and conscious level. By choosing what requires your attention you can train the mind to focus on important items and disregard information that is less important.

Imagine trying to live in an environment where you had to process to every sound, sight, smell, taste or touch all in a nanosecond!

It would drive us all to the nearest psych ward. Without the mechanism of selective attention, you would not be able to function in light of the constant stream of information you receive through the six senses.

Ultimately, what you can hold in attention is limited. By this, I mean, that you can attend to only one thought, one feeling, or one idea at a time. The same concept applies to motor performance—you are limited to the number of things you can do at one time.

For example, some people can't walk and chew gum. Others can't conduct a telephone conversation if a radio is on in the background.

Human attention has a capacity that is limited to serial organization. No matter how much society and technology demand that we multi-task, the human brain is meant to attend to or perform one thing at a time, one after the next. Thus, our mind's capacity for attention is narrow, serial, and limited in some way, but the mechanisms that control this process are necessary for us to function properly. This is one reason why it's important for you to identify what is relevant and not relevant to your focus.

Effective concentration is based upon the serial organization of time. Mental strength coaches, including myself, constantly remind our athletes to stay focused in the here and now, the present moment. We do so because we know that the mind needs to be absorbed in what you are doing right now—not what you did yesterday or will do in the next hour!

When an athlete focuses on possible future outcomes, this is a concentration distraction to what's going on in the present play, shot, or routine. You cannot get into a zone focus when your mind is on the last play, shot, or routine.

I use the phrases such as: first things first, play one shot at a time, one pitch at a time, or one play at a time to make sure that my athletes stay in the here and now.

Playing in the present is a very important key to achieving peak performance, but difficult for athletes to apply consistently.

Step 2: How to Focus on the Process

There are four guidelines that you can apply to achieve a zone focus. Again, this may sound very basic and is easy to understand, however, it is much harder to consistently apply to practice and competition.

1. Identify the cues that are relevant for successful execution for each task in your sport (e.g. tennis serve vs. return of serve). What do you need to focus on to achieve successful execution? What is not relevant to performing each task? (This will help you filter out the cues that will hinder your success.)
2. Immerse yourself in the task-relevant cues you identified in number one. You have the power to selectively attend to what you want to and filter out those items which are not relevant. (This is where preparatory routines might come into play for some athletes. A routine will help guide you to become mentally absorbed in the task rather than the distractions during competition.)
3. Recognize when you are off-task, distracted, or out of your normal routine. This means reviewing your past performances to determine how and when your focus wanders or breaks down (e.g. external distraction, doubt, indecision, etc.). Be prepared to respond to this information by refocusing.
4. Create a strategy to help you refocus on the relevant cues of the task. This is the most important step in dealing with distractions and breakdowns in focus.

Identify What's Relevant to Successful Execution

This may seem trivial, but this is what successful coaches do to help athletes gain an execution focus. Coaches should identify what thoughts and images (cues) are important for an athlete to focus on given the requirements of the skill or task. Below is a list of specific tasks and examples of corresponding performance cues.

Golf Putt

Task-Relevant Cues:

- Assessing the green
- Reading the green/slope
- Picking a line Taking a practice stroke
- Visualizing the putt go on line
- Aiming the putter
- Setting the body square to line
- Focusing on the line
- Focusing on the speed of putt

Task Irrelevant Cues:

- Last putt on last hole
- Worry about 3-putting
- Worry about missing
- Score for the hole
- Doubting the line
- External distractions
- Environmental distractions
- What's for dinner
- Homework assignments

Basketball Free Throw

Task-Relevant Cues:

- Bouncing the ball
- Feeling the ball weight
- Setting up on line
- Seeing the shot trajectory
- Taking a practice stroke
- Visualizing the ball going in
- Balance
- Reacting to the target

Task Irrelevant Cues:

- Who's behind the basket
- Other external distractions
- Who's in the stands
- The last miss at line
- What's for dinner
- Work assignments
- Score of the game
- Worry about winning

Swimming 100m Fly

Task-Relevant Cues:

- Getting lose on the blocks
- Stretching
- Rehearsing the race
- Feeling your stroke
- Set up on the blocks
- Reacting to the gun
- Finding a rhythm in the water
- Feeling strong pushes

Task Irrelevant Cues:

- The last race External distractions
- Who's in the stands
- Who's next to you
- What's for dinner
- What coach is thinking
- Score of the match
- Worry about winning

The cues and distractions above are examples and can be applied to your performance, but your list may be longer or shorter. The shorter the better—you want to keep it simple as to avoid confusing yourself with too many cues to attend to at once.

What's also important is that you identify the typical distractions that cause you to become sidetracked during competition.

Immerse Your Mind in Task-relevant Cues

When you are in the zone and your focus is task directed, it's easy to get into a zone focus—it happens without trying. You automatically react to the appropriate cues in the environment. You can almost see the level of focus in professional athletes when they are trying to win a golf tournament or on their face when they're at-bat.

Professional athletes have practiced and refined their zone focus for years, which is why they make it look so easy. On the other hand, you and I have to work at achieving our zone focus.

If you start a game or performance flat, have unrealistic expectations, dwell on issues in your life, or just do not know what to focus on you have distractions, this will interfere with your ability to get focused on the task.

If you have identified what to focus on, you are not mentally searching when it matters most—you know what to do when the game comes down to crunch time. This is why performance routines are so important. They help you stay grounded to the task at hand by guiding you into an execution focus. (Later I will discuss the importance of a routine.)

Notice When You Get Off-task

Picture this: You're a gymnast getting ready to mount the balance beam. You are going over the routine in your head and visualizing the elements. All is fine up until now, when you see one of your parents in the stands and start to wonder if you will let him or her down with a poor performance.

In a single instant you're off-task by just having your eyes wander to the stands.

To get back in zone focus, you need to first recognize that you have wandered away from the cues of your performance. As soon as you become aware that you're off-task is when you need to adjust your focus so you can get back to preparing to execute the task (e.g. the beam routine.)

This may be the most important step in the refocus stage because of the level of awareness and commitment it takes on your part.

Refocus Back on the Ingredients of the Task

The second you notice that you are off-task, the final and most important step is to release the distraction and get back to the present. Exercise some discipline of focus and immerse yourself into the requirements of the task. If you get out of your normal routine or get distracted, catch yourself, and get back to your routine. This entire process should not take more than 2-4 seconds to complete "on the fly."

Restart or Refocus?

With some self-paced tasks such as a golf shot, tennis serve, bowling throw, or free throw in basketball, I recommend to stop and restart the routine over again if they get distracted in any way.

This may not be possible in some sports with continuous action, like hockey or basketball in which you are reacting to an opponent. That's why you should quickly try and refocus on the fly.

You have to learn to quickly recognize distractions and equally as fast, get your head back into the task. The simple question you should ask yourself is this: "What do I need to focus on right now to execute this play, shot, or routine?"

I use a simple three-step method to help you remember how to refocus. It's called the Three R's for Refocusing.

- Recognize—that you are not on task or out of your mental routine.
- Regroup—and break the current distraction or thought.
- Refocus—on the task-relevant cues of the next play, shot, or routine.

Step 3: Use Performance Goals to Help Focus on the Process

An obsession with the outcome or result of the game, match, or performance is a distraction rather than a motivator. Golf pro, Phil Mickelson might frequently talk about how his goal every week is to win the golf tournament. But what he doesn't say is how he goes about winning the golf tournament. Phil may say to the media that he needs to shoot a 67 to win, but he does not obsess on his score with every shot on the course. He knows that playing one shot at a time is what will bring his best chance of a low round—doing his best on each shot.

A great deal of my coaching is spent working with athletes to help them to stop obsessing about the outcome of the game, match, or event. Everyone wants to win—so put that goal aside and ask yourself how you will win on a moment-by-moment or play-by-play process. The ability to work the process is what brings good results.

Let me give you an example: If you're a golfer and trying to make a short putt, does it help you to think about what the putt is worth or what score you will have if you make or miss the putt? The answer is no.

These thoughts only increase your anxiety or tension and take your focus away from what you really need to do to execute well.

If you boil it down, the best way to make the putt is to think about hitting the ball at your target with the correct line and speed and that's the bottom line-- the common denominator for all putts, or the basics to good execution. This simple notion gets lost when you project ahead to outcomes or results of your actions.

The best way to maintain a focus on the process is to set simple goals for the day to help you focus on the process instead of outcomes. I hesitate to use the word "goals" because this implies an evaluation about how well you did (or are doing) to reach those goals. A better term is "focal points."

The idea is to occupy your mind with a mission that stresses the present moment objectives instead of outcomes or results. There are two different type of goals I teach:

- **Performance Goals**—goals based on something you can measure such as number of rebounds or blocked shots.
- **Mental Goals**—goals based on your mental game that help you focus on one play, shot, or routine at a time such as committing to a plan or visualizing your pitch before you start the wind up.

The purpose of the above goals is to help you become immersed into the ingredients of the task to have a solid mental game. Goals often serve as reminders as to what to focus on for certain skills.

A Simple Routine Binds Your Focus to Execution

There are two types of routines and you can use both to help you stay grounded in the task and prepare for execution.

1. Pre-performance Routines—are a transition between other roles in your life and sports. This is when you enter the roll of the athlete and begin to get your "game face" on. They often include some type of warm up prior to competition. A race car driver uses a specific pre-race routine for suiting up and getting into the car.

2. Pre-shot Routines—mostly are used by athletes in self-paced tasks, like a serve in tennis or a free throw in basketball. Pre-shot routines spell out a specific set of predetermined behaviors and thoughts prior to execution of motor skills.

Here is an example of a free throw routine in Basketball:

- Take a deep breath—release the last shot or play, it's over, let it go
- Get your alignment—get settled and —grounded on the line
- Bounce or twirl the ball—get a feel for the ball
- See it, feel it, or hear it go in—get a positive picture, image, or thought
- Tell yourself that it's going in—a confident statement
- Focus on a specific target—a spot on the rim of the basket
- Trust it—react to the target

A free-throw routine is your best asset at the line when the pressure is on to make the shot. This is when you are most challenged by internal and external distractions. Total absorption in the steps of the routine helps to occupy your mind and thus deflect distractions that may come into your mind. The cues in the routine also serve to keep you focused in the process.

The starting point in a good foul shot routine is to release the last play and get the proverbial monkey off your back. Put the last play behind you because you don't want to lose energy on what just happened. Take a deep breath and center yourself on the foul line.

Your mind should be clear and ready to focus on the target. Settle in and get your alignment as you always do in your foul shot routine. Bounce, twirl or hold the ball in a way that feels good to you (or do what you usually do here). Feel the weight of the ball and center yourself on the line.

Next, create a good mental picture of the ball's trajectory and visualize it go in, or just "sense" the ball going in the hole. The key here is to create a positive picture or feeling in your mind to boost confidence. See it, hear it, feel it, or think about it going in, and know it is going in. If you get a bad picture or thought here, STOP immediately and restart your routine from the beginning. (Remember, recognizing distractions are important to how well you will execute your task.)

Next, use your inner voice (what we call self-talk) to confirm your confidence, such as "I've made this shot thousands of times before" or "I know this is going in!" Focus on a specific spot of the rim where you want the ball to enter. Look at the front of the rim or the back of the rim—your preference here.

The most important phase is to react to the target. Look at the target and trust yourself now. You don't want to think about the mechanics of your stroke. Just trust what you see and let it go! You are an athlete—perform like one—from gut instinct.

If at any time your mind wanders to a negative result or the past, STOP and refocus on the process I just described. Keep your mind locked into this routine. Personalize it and make it your routine.

The final tip - be consistent with the routine - a consistent routine leads to consistent performance. Do the same thing each and every time!

These are simple steps in a routine, but your routine is just one long behavior to help you focus on execution and be ready to make a good shot. This is the only shot in basketball in which you have time on your side. You don't have to go until you are confident, focused, and ready to go.

Step 4: Putting a Stop to Distractions

Distractions can come in many ways and forms from subtle to not so subtle. Part of entering a zone focus is the ability to respond appropriately to distractions during practice and competition. I classify distractions into two categories:

1. Internal distractions
2. Extraneous distractions

The most common distractions for the athletes I work with are internal distractions. They are often self-induced and enter the mind in the form of doubt, indecision, and lack of confidence or negative thoughts about your performance. Your own thoughts, not the environment, usually trigger internal distractions.

Extraneous distractions are the changes in the environment that cause you to get off task if you give them your energy. Examples of extraneous distractions include hecklers in the stands, a change in the weather, or a fan who runs onto the field at a ball game. External events usually trigger this type of distraction, but can also turn into internal distractions if not filtered.

Here are some typical external and internal distractions:

- Unusual noises or visual distractions—the sound of clubs rattling in a player's bag on the adjacent fairway.
- Psych-outs or intimidation—an opposing competitor trying to purposely take you off your game by playing mental games.
- Judges—a figure skater or gymnast thinking too much about what the judges think.
- The presence of media—photographers, interviewers, cameras, flashes from camera bulbs, heat from lights, etc.
- Over-coaching—coaches who do not know when to stop coaching and let athletes play.
- Unjust refereeing—worry about not being treated with fairness.
- A mind block—you simply forget what to do next.
- Negative Thoughts—a tennis player worried about double faulting.
- Fear or anxiety—worry about missing a putt. Afraid to fail.
- Doubt or lack of self-confidence—you question your ability to strike out the batter in crunch time.
- Off-arena, off-court, or off-field distractions—dwelling on non-sport distractions during competition such as business, family or relationship issues.
- Comfort zones or breaking mental barriers—trying to throw your first no-hitter in baseball or break 80 the first time in golf.
- Need to impress others—the presence of parents, friends or peers in the stands.
- Frustration and dwelling—dwelling on past errors and being upset.
- Mind reading—an over-acute awareness of what other may or may not be thinking about you as an athlete or person.

What are the most typical distractions, both internal and external that occur for you?

I ask this important question to all my athletes.

Start by writing a list of your most typical distractions and in what situations they most likely occur. This is an awareness exercise, go ahead and write them out below:

Situation	Distraction

The next step is to develop a plan for dealing with each distraction. The goal is to anticipate distractions and then develop coping strategies to get back on task. The key to overcoming distractions is in developing a way to cope with each of your typical distractions, such as the Three R's I previously discussed.

Situation	Plan to Deal w/ Distraction

Step 5: Stick to What You Can Control

I try to instill in athletes the idea that you must focus on what you can control in the sport environment. For example, with a racecar driver, sticking to the elements of driving the car and not diverting energy to things he could not directly control—such as questioning the car's setup during the race.

Focusing on what he can't control merely serves as distraction. The driver can only control so much once he is in a race. Instead, I advised him to focus on doing what he does best which is driving the car without concerning himself with any issues beyond his control.

Any racing team will tell you that it is very important to have a good car setup while in practice and to improve the setup as much as possible throughout qualifying. Once the green flag drops there are many factors that are just out of a driver's control.

Yes, the driver can adjust anti-roll bars, brake bias and weight position on the ovals from within the car, but when it comes down to it, unless the driver makes pit stops, he can't alter the set up. A driver must deal with what he has and drive the car to the best of his ability.

“Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.”~ John Wooden

In addition, the driver does not have control over what the other drivers are doing in the race. He or she does not control the track or weather conditions during the race, which may result in delays. You should not waste any energy on the things you cannot change.

Focus all your energy on the factors that you can control - emotions, focus and level of confidence. A race car driver has control over how he reacts to situations that occur during the race. You too can work your race plan (or routine), choose to be confident, and keep your mind focused on the track (or the execution).

Remember that although some events may be beyond your immediate influence, you can control your reactions to those events. A poor call from the referee is beyond your control, but you have two options in any situation.

You can get frustrated and dwell on the idea that the referee has your number or you can put the call behind you and focus on the next play. The following are under your control:

- Emotions
- Thoughts
- Feelings
- Images
- What to focus on
- Game strategy
- Level of confidence
- Your own performance

The Ebb and Flow of Concentration

If you're an athlete in a sport such as football, hockey, golf, baseball, bowling or gymnastics you are aware that your intensity of focus changes with the demands of the sport. In these sports there are natural downtimes where play has stopped such as between downs in football or the changing of apparatus during a gymnastics meet.

Some sports such as golf, baseball, bowling and others have long periods between shots or pitches. As an athlete of these sports, you are required to click on your focus for short periods and then occupy your mind during downtime between shots or pitches. This adds an extra challenge because you need to learn how to relax and then gear up your focus shortly before the next play or round.

I suggest that you learn not only how to relax the intensity of your focus, but also to focus in when its time to make the next shot or go to bat. Most people have the power of concentration to stay focused intensely for 1-2 minutes at a time, but some competitions can last as long as 3-4 hours.

It is very difficult to keep up the intensity of focus for that length of competition. This will only lead to burn out and frustration.

Instead, enjoy yourself and relax the focus between plays, innings, or shots. I'm not telling you to take a nap, but I'm giving you permission to relax your focus during natural breaks in play.

The easy part is relaxing the focus between plays or shots. The difficulty arises when you need to turn on concentration at will such as when it's time to throw the first pitch of the next inning.

Some athletes will develop triggers, which are imbedded in their pre-pitch, pre-play, or pre-shot routines. A trigger is a simple physical task you perform at the start of an at-routine such as tapping the base with you bat in the batter's box.

Are You Practicing or Performing?

A related issue to focus is the concept of two different mindsets:

- The practice mindset
- The performance mindset

Both are needed to become a complete player and be able to take your practice game to competition.

The practice mindset will differ from the performance or competitive mindset so it's worth discussing as it relates to your focus.

As you practice a skill and move through the stages of learning (beginning, intermediate and advanced,) what you attend to when performing also shifts. Well-learned skills do not require conscious thought to execute and perform—and that's the purpose of practice; to make your skills feel automatic and natural.

For example, an expert downhill skier does not (and should not) pay attention to the technique of skiing and turning through the gates during a race. This allows a skier to focus on timing the gates, a line in the snow, and staying balanced. The skier is in the performance mindset.

This is the mindset you need to perform your best, which allows your training to take over. A skier may evaluate his or her performance in the next practice and decide to make a change in method or technique. The skier is then in a practice mindset, focusing on the “how to” of skiing.

With practice and a ton of repetition, he or she can make the new method feel automatic when it comes time to compete.

The best athletes have well-tuned bodies. They can react instantly without conscious thought. They know how to get the job done regardless of how they perfected their technique. The important lesson is that when performing in a game (or dance/gymnastics routine) an athlete needs to rely on instinct and his or her past practice.

This is how a dancer can focus on reacting to the dance music or the gymnast can focus on the flow of the routine, or in team sports for example, a football player can react to his opponent while executing the play instinctively.

Step 6: Getting Zoned in for Practice

It's not unusual for a player or entire team to go to practice with a negative or lackadaisical mindset. This is especially challenging in sports that have long seasons and many practice sessions during the season.

Athletes who don't get up for practice usually just go through the physical motions of practice without focused intensity. In many sports where you have very long seasons and many days of practice, it's human nature for athletes to “go through the motions” for a variety of reasons.

The biggest one is that athletes simply love to compete and find practice boring. The emotions and excitement about competition helps you get into a zone focus. When adrenaline and excitement kick in so does your focus.

Quality practice should be:

1. Goal-driven
2. Focused
3. Varied,
4. Applied to what you do in competition.

What you practice should be specific to skills you need in competition and driven by a goal you want to reach. For example, a basketball player could set a goal to hit seven out of ten jump shots.

You should strive to have the same intensity and focus in practice that you maintain in the competitive environment (easier said than done, I know). You should vary the skills you practice from drill to drill or skill.

Lastly, engage in competitive-specific practice so it transfers better to games and matches. If you already apply these guidelines, you are engaged in focused practice.

“Concentration is why some athletes are better than others. You develop that concentration in training. You can’t be lackadaisical in training and concentrate in a meet.”~ Edwin Moses

Apply Specificity Training

For athletes who feel practice is boring, having a purpose, goals, stimulation, and challenges are very important. The best way to practice is to simulate how you perform in the actual competition.

This is how Peter Vidmar, an Olympic gymnast, trained before the 1984 Olympics. Peter’s goal was to make his practice intensity and environment match as close to a real meet as possible. He wanted to practice with the same distractions and emotions that are part of a competition.

At the UCLA gymnasium, Peter and his teammates simulated the circumstances and feel of a competition. They wore competition uniforms, played crowd noise, and introduced other distractions present during a meet. At the start of each gymnastic routine, he raised his hand to his coach (just as he does for judges in a meet to signal he is ready for the routine. In his mind, he was competing.

This type of practice—what is called specificity training—raised his focus and intensity in practice, which helped him compete at a higher level. During competition, he simply imagined he was back at the UCLA gym going through his normal practice routine.

Many teams and athletes use specificity training when they practice, not only to better transfer their skills by making the environment more realistic, to enhance the intensity of focus. Football teams run live plays and scrimmage with other teams. Tennis players play warm-up matches and golfers play practice rounds at the actual tournament site.

Golf legend Seve Ballesteros would play an entire round with just a couple of golf clubs when he practiced. This required him to be creative with his shots and use his imagination. To date, other golfers consider him to have the best imagination in golf with his ability to make up shots on the golf course.

“I began to acquire my powers of concentration long ago when learning to create a variety of shots with only my old 3-iron. I had to focus very intensely indeed on the grip, the setup, and the swing path to get the results I wanted out of that awkward, overlong club, and it taught me how to enter a mental cocoon which today insures that every shot I play gets my undivided attention”
- Seve Ballesteros (1988)

Make it Fun

Great coaches know that if the team feels challenged and is having fun at the same time, the team members’ intensity and focus will rise to the occasion. What is the best way to have a challenging and fun environment?

One way is to involve a sense of friendly competition.

Most athletes love to compete and this is what motivates them to excel. For example, a golf coach can set up a shoot out in practice in which the players compete on the putting green to see who can get the closest to the hole with a 50 foot putt.

Two-Minute Drill

Use the two-minute drill when you (or your team) are unfocused or procrastinating. Sometimes it helps to jumpstart your focus in practice. This is when you try to focus for brief periods (one to two minutes) and then relax the focus.

A batter may commit to taking one minute of heightened focus batting practice. What happens is that one minute turns into two, then three, and so on. Soon your focus improves as you get more into the challenge of the task. A task or drill must be challenging for you to get into a flow.

Here are some other reminders for enhancing focus in practice:

- *Enter the role of the athlete.* Make a commitment that for the next 2-3 hours you will completely focus on the role of an athlete and suspend your judgments about other issues in life.
- *Stay focused on the process.* Use your practice time to work on your focusing skills such as concentrating on the here and now and using the Three R's to refocus when you get off task. The best time to improve your mental game skills is during practice, not during competition.
- *Set a goal for the day.* Work on something specific you want to improve that day... your swimming technique in the butterfly, your exits in skydiving or your back handspring in gymnastics. Think about how you will measure your progress and evaluate a successful practice.
- *Use the pre-performance routines* you normally would in a game situation. You use a pre-shot, at-bat, or pre-play routine in competition, why wouldn't you do the same in practice? Remember to do in practice what you do in a game or performance. This includes working your warm up and pre-performance routines.
- *Practice your refocusing skills* and the three R's. Practice is the best time to apply your refocusing skill and to test how well you are doing with it. You might need to modify your approach before you put it into action in games.
- *Focus on having fun.* If you are having fun and feeling challenged, then it's easier to get into the flow of practice. Enjoy yourself in practice instead becoming negative and dwelling on team conflicts, cliques within the team, or lack of playing time.

Get a Grip on Your Focus

My approach to focus is not to teach concentration drills per se. I think athletes already have the power of concentration, but sometimes, for whatever reason it is misplaced. I know some mental coaches tout the use of a concentration grid, I do use one, depending on the athlete and situation.

Concentration includes several elements as we have discussed:

1. Identifying what is relevant to attend to in your sport.
2. Using refocusing skills when you recognize you are off task.
3. The ability to shift focus from broad to narrow, internal to external.
4. Staying highly focused during a specific period of time.

Thus, if you are going to develop "drills" to improve concentration, it would serve you to address the above four components.

If you need to have a structured concentration exercise you may want to try these simple exercises:

1. Tighten Your Focus Drill. Select a small object like an apple or golf ball. Place the golf ball on a desk in front of you. The goal is to see how long you can visually engage with and study the object without distractions or your mind wandering off-task. This is a simple drill to test the intensity of focus and how many extraneous thoughts will come into your mind. You may find that you can only do this for a few seconds before you are interrupted by other thoughts unrelated to the object of attention. This requires that you become aware of the extraneous thoughts when they occur.

2. Purposeful Distraction Drill. You will need a partner to do this drill. Here you will want to perform a skill in your sport. A golfer, for example, would try to make a putt while another person is purposely trying to distract the golfer. The fellow golfer would say things such as, “don’t miss” or “if you miss, you’ll lose the match.” Your goal is to pay attention to execution of the task, while ignoring the external distractions.

3. Imagery Drill. This might be the most applicable concentration exercise. Pick a skill in your sport. Skydivers, for example, need to rely a lot on their imagery skills to learn maneuvers and build upon their ground training due the expense of practicing in air. The goal would be to visualize your performance from several perspectives (first person and third person). This is when you want to keep focused while visualizing your routine. You can take it a step further and practice your refocusing skills within your imagery. It is then that you can anticipate a potential distraction in the air and then rehearse how you will refocus and cope with the distraction.

Wrap-Up

Every athlete has the power to concentrate in his or her sport. What you choose to focus on and how you cope with distractions is ultimately the road to entering a zone focus. Entering a zone focus is definitely a prerequisite to finding the zone.

A huge part of getting into the zone is your ability to focus on the right things and in balance. Focusing skills can be applied to enhance other mental game challenges such as confidence and composure. Some of the best athletes in the world have reported that focus is the single most important mental skill you can possess as an athlete.

After an athlete begins a program with me, I discuss what improvements he or she can expect going forward. I don’t want to mislead athletes and tell them that their problems are “fixed” when they leave.

Mental Strength Coaching is not about “fixing” an athlete’s problems. Rather, Mental Strength Coaching is about teaching mental skills you can apply day after day, each and every day.

The idea is to integrate these skills into your practice and competition over weeks and months. The goal is to identify ineffective habits and beliefs and replace them with effective habits and beliefs that can improve performance. Even when you feel on top of your game and are focusing well in your sport, it’s still important to review the basics of good focus and stick to the plan.

Learning any new skill takes time. It does not matter if you are learning a physical skill or a mental one, repetition and application is necessary to make it part of your everyday practice and performance routines. Reading and re-reading, applying focus skills to practice, and committing to improving your mental game skills over time, (even when you are performing well,) will lead to a consistent mental game and performance.