

## Train Your Brain:

### Peak Performance through Mental Training

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Excelling in sport athletics can be a daunting task, especially at the high school level. The numerous demands teenagers face on a daily basis adds a unique challenge to achieving optimal performance. Adolescents must deal with the dynamics of their family, friends, and teachers, as well as trying to manage the time they spent on their homework, with their team, and their family and friends. Plus, they have to deal with a little thing called puberty, which makes it all the more difficult.

The purpose of these handouts is to discuss some simple sport and exercise psychology topics that will help you put it all together and make it work. Hopefully, these lessons will help you make your sport experience that much more successful. You don't need to read these chapters in sequential order. Feel free to read what interests you and go from there. Please note that the info presented in these lessons is by no means meant to undermine anything taught by your coach. This info is simply a review of some popular trends in sport psychology that are meant to enhance performance.



## Chapter 6: Concentration

*"Concentration is the ability to think about absolutely nothing when it is absolutely necessary."*

– Ray Knight, New York Mets

At some point in your career, you will experience a break or lapse in your concentration. Unfortunately, these lapses will lead to a decline in performance. This decline may lead to loss in your self-confidence, decreased self-efficacy, and an increase in self-doubt. Fortunately, athletes at any level of competition can learn to minimize these lapses. In fact, learning to do so will be a key proponent to achieving and maintaining optimal levels of performance and enhancing the entire sport experience. Concentration is being immersed in what is going on now, not what happened a second ago or what will happen during the next. It sounds easy, as though everyone should be able to do this without much effort or training. But formidable obstacles stand in the way of attentiveness. When these obstacles are overcome, high levels of concentration are achieved and you move into an exciting level of play.

Over the years, you may have found that you are excellent at directing your attention when distractions are low, but that

you may falter when distractions increase. Distractions may be either internal or external. Internal distractions are thoughts, feelings, perceptions or any internal information, which is other than what you should be focusing on. When these internal distractions occur, you must work to ignore this internal "noise." and focus on the task. When external distractions occur, the player needs to do the same, focus on the task and ignore the noise. These tasks for concentration may sound difficult, but they're not impossible. Concentration is a mental skill and like other skills, it can be learned.

### Understanding Concentration

At any given time of the day, our senses detect a plethora of information from countless sources. In a sport setting, these images, aromas, sounds, tactile feelings, and the thousands of thoughts we think and emotions we feel can help to hinder or enhance our performance. In addition to preparing for your opponent or the task at hand, you need to prepare yourself for the potential attentional cues that you will encounter. Your mission – should you choose to accept – is to filter out which cues are relevant and which are irrelevant or possibly even damaging. If you can become skilled at focusing on the task at hand and ignoring the bombardment of external and internal distracters, you will enjoy a greater likelihood of success. In a sport and/or exercise setting, a useful way of defining concentration would involve the discussion of four skills:

#### ♦ Focusing on Relevant Cues.

Also recognized as selective attention, an athlete must learn to focus on relevant environmental (external) cues. If a cue is irrelevant or damaging, it is ignored or disregarded. For example, when a basketball player shoots free throws, he will be presented with a number of cues – both relevant (e.g., the basket, rim, pre-shot routine) and irrelevant (e.g., players lined up for the rebound, the crowd noise). His ability to focus on the relevant cues and block out the irrelevant ones will be critical to the successful completion of his foul shot.

#### ♦ Maintaining Attentional Focus

Many athletes have flashes of brilliance, yet few can maintain their high level of play for an entire competition. Athletes who are able to maintain their focus over a long period of time are going to be much more successful than those who cannot. One lapse in concentration over the course of a long contest can mean the difference between winning and losing.

#### ♦ Situation Awareness

Your ability to size up the game situation and your opponents in order to make appropriate decisions is the core of having good situation awareness. This is what your coach is talking about when he tells you to make sure that you "know what's going on around you." Oftentimes, these decisions need to be made under pressure and within seconds (possibly milliseconds). An athlete with good situational awareness will make it seem like he's a step ahead of everyone else.

#### ♦ Shifting Attentional Focus

Depending on the situation, you will need to be able to shift your attentional focus during a contest. Nideffer and colleagues (as cited in Weinberg & Gould, 2003) suggested viewing attentional focus along two dimensions: width (broad or narrow) and direction (external or internal). Examination of these dimensions reveals four attentional styles. While it's very important for an athlete to implement all four styles, he will most likely have a dominant style.

- ☑ **Broad-internal.** Good for absorbing information. An athlete strong in this style will rarely make the same

mistake twice. In fact, they imagine how the game will go before they play it and they will replay it afterwards.

- ☑ **Broad-external.** Required when reacting to competitive situations that are rapidly changing and involve a large physical area. Athletes strong in this style seem to be aware of everything that is going on around them.
- ☑ **Narrow-internal.** Well-suited for event that demand one intense surge of power (e.g., power-lifters, shot put) or the ability to focus on a single task for a long time (e.g., endurance runners, distance swimmers). Athletes strong in this style will typically have a higher tolerance for pain and great endurance.
- ☑ **Narrow-external.** Required when optimal performance requires total concentration on an external task (e.g., field-goal kickers, hitters, bowlers). Athletes strong in this style will be able to maintain focus on their external task without becoming distracted by their own internal thoughts and feelings, as well as irrelevant external stimuli.

Usually without hesitation, athletes will need to change their attentional focus as the situation calls for it. A basketball player leading a fast-break will maintain a *broad-external* focus until he examines the defense and the position of his teammates. Once the decision has been made to pass or shoot the ball, he will need to shift to a *narrow-external* focus in order to get the ball to his teammate or drive to rim for the lay-up (or pull up for the jumper). You will find that when the demands of the situation match your strengths you will excel.

### Playing in the Zone; Going with the FLOW

At some point, you've probably heard an athlete say he was in "**the zone**" during an impressive or record-breaking performance. When athletes make reference to being in the zone, they are referring to an occasion when "the body is brought to peak condition and the mind is completely focused, even unaware of what it's doing, an individual can achieve the extraordinary" (Tolson, as cited in Cox, 2002; p. 144). Csikszentmihalyi (1991) conceptualized a very similar idea he termed FLOW, or optimal experience. This concept refers to a period when an individual experiences a high level of concentration and feelings of deep enjoyment. In the case of athletes experiencing FLOW, they experience a level of concentration so focused that they are absolutely absorbed in the game and their performance. Essentially, an athlete will find himself completely immersed in a situation where his reactions are automatic or inherent.

### "The Physical Genius"

Undoubtedly, an athlete would hold a decided advantage if he possessed the ability to experience FLOW or be in the zone whenever the need arose. In 1999, Gladwell addressed these similar thoughts in an article entitled, "The Physical Genius." In his article, Gladwell stated that there are three things that go into making this "physical genius": raw physical and mental ability, time spent practicing, and what he calls "imagination." While the first two are rather self-explanatory, the third requires some explanation. Gladwell states that it is no surprise that an elite athlete is able to play in zone, because he is potentially in the zone every time he performs. In order to be truly great, an athlete must be more than just someone who spends countless hours training his body and mind. Great athletes must imagine every possible situation that is possible. Having done that, he needs to address how he would react. Having done that, he needs to review his proposed reaction and rehearse it. This is what Gladwell is referring to when he mentions "imagination."

To an elite athlete, there are no surprises because he has imagined every possible situation that could occur. Athletes who are arguable the best ever to play their sport, such as Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Wayne Gretzky, are perfect examples of athletes with this type of "imagination."

### Self-Talk

Anytime you think to yourself, you are in a sense talking to yourself. In sport, we refer to this as self-talk. The benefits of self-talk include improved concentration, self-confidence, and intrinsic motivation. It allows you to focus attention, initiate action, sustain effort, break bad habits and acquire and improve skills. To make it simple, we can divide the different types of self-talk into three categories: positive (motivational), instructional, and negative.

**Positive self-talk** focuses on increasing your energy and effort. Positive self-talk does not serve to enhance any specific task or behavior, only to enhance an athlete's positive attitude. Thoughts such as "I can do it," or "keep it up," would be good examples of positive self-talk. An athlete could use positive self-talk to motivate himself to work a little harder at certain times during a competition. Words as simple as "go," or "now," could serve this implicit purpose.

**Instructional self-talk** is used to help an athlete focus on their technique in order to enhance performance or improve the execution of a specific skill or task. A softball player might use the phrase, "stay down," while batting to help her to remember to keep her knees bent and stay compact while in the batter's box. A golfer might remind himself to "follow through" during a chip shot so that he will swing through his shot, rather than punch at it.

**Negative self-talk** is demeaning and critical. It gets in the way of an athlete reaching his full potential and is likely to produce anxiety and discomfort. Thoughts such as, "you stink," and "how could you do that so poorly?" create self-doubt and will perpetuate poor emotions. As Weinberg and Gould (2003) point out: of the 66,000 thoughts we have in a typical day, 70-80% are negative. Hmm...that's not good.

**To become more successful...try to think positively about things that may be negative.**

In Chapter 3, we discussed the concept of a "self-fulfilling prophecy." If you recall, a self-fulfilling prophecy refers to the phenomenon that expecting something to happen actually causes it to happen. Very similar to this prophecy is a concept referred to as "ironic processes in sport" has demonstrated that trying to NOT perform a specific action can inadvertently trigger its occurrence (Janelle, 1999). So, instructions such as "don't double-fault," "don't get caught stealing second," or my favorite, "don't choke" are extremely counterproductive. Trying to suppress a thought, image, or action by using the forbidden thought will cause us to think about it and probably do it.

**Focus on what to do...not what not to do.**

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