



16. The Psychology of Training: Using Mental Imagery

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Why do we need Psychology in sports?

The increased stress of competitions can cause athletes to react both physically and mentally in a manner which can negatively affect their performance abilities. They may become tense, their heart rates race, they break into a cold sweat, they worry about the outcome of the competition, they find it hard to concentrate on the task in hand. This has led coaches to take an increasing interest in the field of sport psychology and in particular in the area of stress control. That interest has focused on techniques which athletes can use in the competitive situation to maintain control and optimize their performance. Once learned, these techniques allow the athlete to relax and to focus his/her attention in a positive manner on the task of preparing for and participating in competition.

Relaxation Training

There are a number of relaxation techniques which have the following characteristics:

- procedures for first recognizing and then releasing tension in muscles
- concentration on breathing control and regulation
- concentration on sensations such as heaviness, warmth
- mental imagery

Regardless of which technique is used, the following two conditions need to exist if the technique is to be learned:

- the athlete must believe that relaxation will help
- A quiet, dimly lit and warm room which is free from interruption

Meditation for Relaxation

A number of people involved in sports psychology believe that meditation can be useful in getting maximum performance from an athlete (Syer & Connolly, 1984). Engaging in meditation helps reduce stress before an event and with experience the athlete can learn to relax different

muscle groups and appreciate subtle differences in muscle tension. The technique includes the following steps:

- Lie down quietly on your back in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
- Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing to your face.
- Breathe through your nose and become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say the word "one" silently to yourself. For example, breathe in . . . out, "one"; in . . . out, "one"; and so on. Continue for 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm. When you finish, lie quietly for several minutes at first with closed eyes and later with opened eyes.

Maintain a passive attitude, permit relaxation to occur at its own pace and expect other thoughts. When distracting thoughts occur return your concentration to your breathing. Try to practice a relaxation technique once a day.

How do I achieve relaxed muscles?

Progressive muscular relaxation involves the active contracting and relaxing of muscles. When a muscle is tightened for 4-6 seconds and then relaxed, the muscle returns to a more relaxed state. This process should be performed for the following parts of the body in turn -- feet, legs, thighs, buttocks, stomach, back, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, jaw, face and eyes.

How will relaxed muscles feel?

J.H. Schultz in the 1930s noticed that patients in a relaxed state experienced one of two sensations: the feeling of warmth or the feeling of heaviness in completely relaxed limbs. During the relaxation process concentration should be focused on one of these sensations. For the first few sessions the athlete should alternate the focus between sessions to determine which one they prefer.



Can Relaxation have a Negative Effect?

In a competition situation an athlete will either be:

- under-excited; low in arousal; find it hard to "get up" for the competition; disinterested; etc.,
- over-excited; high in arousal; over the top; nervous- anxious; scared of the competition; sick with worry; etc.
- optimally-excited; nervous but in control; looking forward to the competition but apprehensive; thinking positively; feeling good; etc.

If we were to use relaxation procedures with an over excited athlete, we might be able to reduce his/her arousal level to that of the optimally excited athlete. This would have a positive effect on his/her performance. However if we asked an under-excited athlete to use relaxation procedures it would only make it harder for him/her to "get-up" for the competition. The coach therefore has to know his/her athletes and how they react in competitive situations.

What is Mental Imagery ?

Mental imagery involves the athlete imagining themselves in a specific environment or performing a specific activity. The images should have the athlete performing these items very well and successfully. They should see themselves enjoying the activity and feeling satisfied with their performance. They should attempt to enter fully into the image with all their senses. See, hear, feel, touch, smell and perform as they would like to perform in real life. When an athlete is in a fully relaxed state, he/she is particularly receptive to mental imagery.

What can Mental Imagery be used for?

Mental Imagery can be used:

- To see success. Many athletes "see" themselves achieving their goals on a regular basis, both performing skills at a high level and seeing the desired performance outcomes
- To motivate. Before or during training sessions, calling up images of your goals for that session, or of a past or future competition or competitor can serve a motivational purpose. It can vividly remind

you of your objective, which can result in increased intensity in training.

- To perfect skills. Mental imagery is often used to facilitate the learning and refinement of skills or skill sequences. The best athletes "see" and "feel" themselves performing perfect skills, programs, routines, or plays on a very regular basis.
- To familiarize. Mental imagery can be effectively used to familiarize yourself with all kinds of things, such as a competition site, a race course, a complex play pattern or routine, a pre-competition plan, an event focus plan, a media interview plan, a refocusing plan, or the strategy you plan to follow
- To set the stage for performance. Mental imagery is often an integral part of the pre-competition plan, which helps set the mental stage for a good performance. Athletes do a complete mental run through of the key elements of their performance. This helps draw out their desired pre-competition feelings and focus. It also helps keep negative thoughts from interfering with a positive pre-game focus.
- To refocus. Mental imagery can be useful in helping you to re focus when the need arises. For example, if a warm-up is feeling sluggish, imagery of a previous best performance or previous best event focus can help get things back on track. You can also use imagery as a means of refocusing within the event, by imagining what you should focus on and feeling that focus.

How do I Apply Mental Imagery ?

Golfing great Jack Nicklaus used mental imagery. In describing how he images his performance, he wrote:

"I never hit a shot even in practice without having a sharp in-focus picture of it in my head. It's like a color movie. First, I "see" the ball where I want it to finish, nice and white and sitting up high on the bright green grass. Then the scene quickly changes, and I "see" the ball going there: its path, trajectory, and shape, even its behavior on landing. Then there's a sort of fade-out, and the next scene shows me making the kind of swing that will turn the previous images into reality only at the end of this short private Hollywood spectacular do I select a club and step up to the ball."



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When should mental imagery be used?

To become highly proficient at the constructive use of imagery, you have to use it every day, on your way to training, during training, after training, and in the evenings before sleeping. If you want to perfect and use mental imagery to your fullest advantage you can start by doing two things. In every training session, before you execute any skill or combination of skills, first do it in imagery as perfectly and precisely as possible. See, feel, and experience yourself moving through the actions in your mind as you would like them actually to unfold. In competitions, before the event starts, mentally recall the event focus plan, significant plays, skills, movements, reactions, or feelings that you want to carry into the event.

What are the Benefits?

Relaxation itself can be useful in a number of circumstances including:

- the promotion of rest, recovery and recuperation
- the removal of stress related reactions, e.g., increased muscular tension, etc.,
- the establishing of a physical and mental state which has an increased receptivity to positive mental imagery

- the establishing of a set level of physical and mental arousal prior to warming up for competition.

When combined with positive mental imagery it is useful in:

- developing self confidence
- developing pre-competition and competition strategies which teach athletes to cope with new situations before they actually encounter them
- helping the athlete to focus his/her attention or concentrate on a particular skill he/she is trying to learn or develop. This can take place both in or away from the training session
- the competition situation.

"You only achieve what you believe"

This is a quotation of mine that I quote to an athlete when I hear them make a negative statement about their ability. I also use it to focus the athlete's attention when assisting them to develop mental imagery skills.