



Providing information to individuals and teams seeking optimal performance

Imagery – It /s All In Your Head...

In a recent review of the literature, Williams and Krane (2001) identified imagery as one of the most frequently used mental skills by elite athletes.

Most of us can create a picture of a tiger in our heads. Try it now... If you were able to “see” that tiger, congratulations! You have just used visual imagery.

What Is Imagery?

Visual imagery is usually the easiest for people to use but imagery is not limited only to the visual type. Vealey and Greenleaf (2001) define imagery as the process of “using all the senses to create or re-create an experience in the mind” (p.248). Thus, in addition to creating visual imagery in your mind, you can also create or re-create the experience of smell, sound, taste, and touch. You can even include emotions.

How Is Imagery Used in Sports?

Athletes use imagery to improve both physical and mental skills. For physical skills, imagery can help an athlete learn new skills, practice already developed skills, and solve problems with technique. Research has demonstrated skill performance improvement through the use of imagery in sports such as basketball, golf, tennis, volleyball, football, figure skating, swimming, and gymnastics. Research also supports the improvement of mental skills such as energy control, goal setting, self-confidence, relaxation, attention/concentration, and self-talk through the use of imagery.

Additionally, and as noted in the January issue of *Performance Enhancement News*, imagery is one of several mental tools that can be used to help injured athletes return to play. Specific uses of imagery in the recovery process include pain management, stress reduction, and managing the fear of reinjury. There is also evidence that the use of healing imagery may help an injured athlete return to play

faster (Vealey & Greenleaf, 2001).

How Does Imagery Work?

The exact reasons why imagery works are not known but several theories have been developed. While it is beyond the scope of this newsletter to discuss these theories in detail, they all suggest that imagery helps athletic performance by offering an additional avenue for practicing skills – either through strengthening muscle memory, the athlete’s cognitive map of the skill being imagined, or his or her emotional and mental set – which can lead to an increased likelihood of performing automatically and more effectively.

A study by Hird, Landers, Thomas, and Horan (1991) focused on imagery and physical practice and highlighted several important considerations. The results indicated that athletes who used a combination of imagery and physical practice showed more improvement in performance than did those who used physical practice alone. They also found that the use of physical practice alone was superior to using only imagery. The bottom line is that the use of imagery is better than no practice at all (as in doing an imagined workout while injured or when circumstances will not allow for a real practice) but the real benefit comes from combining imagery with physical practice.

It’s Easy To Start

Here is an example of an introductory imagery exercise that I use with athletes to demonstrate using all of the senses. Until you have tried it a few times, it may help to have someone read it to you.

Find a quiet place and sit for a moment. While you sit, allow an image of an orange to form in your mind. **See** the shape. **See** the color. **See** the pitted, uneven skin. Now, reach out and pick up the orange. Notice the weight. Notice that the skin **feels** slightly bumpy. Notice the slight variations in the color as you turn it in your

hand.

Now, using your thumb, dig into the skin. **Hear** the skin tear. You **feel** some juice spray on your hand. Notice the **smell** of the orange. Now gently separate a wedge and place the wedge in your mouth. Notice how the sides of the wedge **feel** smooth. Notice your salivary glands becoming active as the wedge **touches** your tongue. Notice the way the wedge **feels** as you bite down on it. Now, chew the wedge. Notice the **sound** your chewing makes. **Taste** the juice that comes from the wedge. Notice how it **feels** to swallow the pulp and juice. After you finish eating the wedge, become aware of your breathing and your surroundings.

As you look back over the exercise, you will notice that I’ve highlighted the sensory aspects that you experienced simply by thinking about them. You may have found that some of the senses were easier to imagine than others. That is a fairly common experience. Most people find that with practice, they can become skilled at including most, if not all, of the senses in their imagery work. This is important because the more senses you can include, the more vivid and effective the imagery experience becomes. Finally, once you have identified the most helpful emotions for you in your sport, these emotions can also be incorporated into your imaging.

As with any athletic skill, practicing is critical. You can start the process of making imagery a performance tool by recalling an especially good athletic performance. Try to remember how it felt physically and emotionally. Make sure to focus on what went right.

In the next issue of *Performance Enhancement News*, I will discuss some sport specific examples of imagery.

For more information about this topic or any other topic related to mental skills or sport psychology, contact your local sport psychologist.

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