



Providing information to individuals and teams seeking optimal performance

Developing Imagery as a Performance Tool

Imagery involves using the senses to create or re-create an experience in the mind and is one of the most frequently used mental skills by elite athletes. This issue is focused on guiding you through three practical imagery exercises of increasing difficulty. Practicing these exercises will allow you to start developing your imagery skills.

Sport-Themed Practice of Imagery

Each of the following exercises will include most of the five senses. The literature suggests that using as many senses as possible leads to a more vivid image and “the more vivid the image, the more effective it is” (Vealey & Greenleaf, 2001, p. 249). If you are unable to imagine all of the senses used in these exercises, keep trying. Most people are able to become skilled at including most, if not all, of the senses with continued practice.

First, find an essential piece of equipment from your sport. Then, find a chair and sit down. While holding your chosen object, focus on it for several moments. Then put it aside. Close your eyes and take a few slow, deep breaths. Now, **visualize** the object you just examined. How does it **feel**? How does it **sound** when it is used? Does it have any particular **smell** (for example, the leather of a softball or a baseball glove)? Spend 10 minutes or so focusing only on the image of this object and its various sensory qualities.

The second exercise begins by physically performing a routine task from your sport. This can include a task such as a tennis serve, a free throw, a field goal, a four-foot putt, etc. Perform the task several times and pay careful attention to how the activity **feels** and **sounds**. Now, sit down and close your eyes. Take a few slow, deep breaths and imagine yourself performing that task. Try to include **seeing** yourself performing the task, **feeling** yourself performing the task, and **hearing** yourself performing the task. Alternate between actually performing the task and imagining

yourself performing the task several times.

Finally, think about pre-season practice for your sport. If you have been playing for any length of time, you have most likely gone through a hundred or more of these. While practices may differ depending on what your coach is trying to emphasize on a particular day, there are most likely certain drills that you go through on a regular basis. Examples of these include batting practice, driving off the practice tee, or shooting free throws. Most athletes can identify several of their “core” drills. For the purpose of this exercise, identify 3 or 4 of these.

Once you have chosen your drills, and depending upon how comfortable you are with both imagery and the drills, you can use them in one of two ways. If you are quite comfortable with both, simply sit in a quiet area, close your eyes, and take a few slow, deep breaths. Then, beginning with the first drill (probably the easiest one), imagine yourself performing the drill while focusing on **seeing** yourself performing the drill, **hearing** the sounds associated with the drill, and **feeling** yourself completing the drill. Remember to include the senses of **smell** and **taste** if applicable.

If you are still developing your imagery skills or are not very familiar with the drill you are including, physically perform the drill while paying attention to how it **feels**, **sounds**, etc. Then, imagine performing that drill.

Once you have become skilled at vividly imagining the first drill, practice the second, presumably more difficult, drill using the guidelines above until you can imagine it vividly. Then add the third and, eventually, the fourth drills. Once you are able to vividly imagine doing all four drills, imagine doing them one after the other. Congratulations! You have now mentally created a practice set.

Two other issues are important in any discussion of imagery. First, it is not

uncommon for athletes to report difficulty sustaining focus during imagery. If you notice that you tend to lose your focus during an exercise, take a few slow, deep breaths and gently redirect your attention back to the task. With practice, you will become more skilled at remaining focused.

Second, I am frequently asked about which visual perspective, internal or external, to use during imagery. An internal perspective means you are “seeing” things through your own eyes. An external perspective means that you are watching yourself as if you were on television. Per Vealey and Greenleaf (2001), which perspective is used initially is up to the athlete. However, I do encourage athletes to work to develop skill with both perspectives as they can enhance performance in different ways. For example, an external perspective is useful in replaying an especially good performance which can help build confidence. An internal perspective is excellent for learning how it feels to do certain activities like making a 3-pointer.

Making imagery a part of your mental skills toolbox means that with practice, you can rehearse your sport anywhere, anytime whether you are injured or well. While it is beyond the scope of this newsletter, imagery is also a significant building block for creating a pre-performance routine. This is important as it helps an athlete prepare for competition by helping to create the mindset that is needed in order to perform to the best of his or her ability.

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

Editor's note: In the March issue of Performance Enhancement News, a study by Hird, Landers, Thomas, and Horan (1991) was incorrectly identified as finding that a combination of physical practice and imagery led to more performance improvement than physical practice alone. In fact, this was reported by Burton and Raedke (2008).

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- Vealey, R.S., & Greenleaf, C.A. (2001). Seeing is believing: Understanding and using imagery in sport. In Williams, J.M. (ed.). *Applied Sport Psychology: Personal Growth to Peak Performance* (pp.247-283). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Announcement: UAB Sport Psychology's Mental Toughness Course

As noted in the September 2007 edition of *Performance Enhancement News*, developing mental toughness is a process that is only now becoming more completely understood. UAB Sport Psychology is presently creating a course to help athletes develop the skills consistent with the emerging literature regarding mental toughness.

This course will focus on increasing the individual athlete's self-awareness of mental strengths and areas needing more work. Additionally, participants will learn a variety of mental skills used by elite athletes, such as emotion control and focus. With practice, the athletes will be able to use the above information to set up individualized pre-performance routines, regrouping plans, and general mental preparation strategies that will allow them to perform to the best of their ability. We will also discuss ways to incorporate mental toughness training into physical practice.

The course is expected to be offered in the Fall of 2008. It will meet one night per week for 10 weeks at UAB-Huntsville. The course will be limited to 25 athletes ages 15 and older. Coaches can enroll in the course with the understanding that the focus will be on their mental toughness and not on how to teach mental toughness to their athletes. There will be homework between each class. At the end of the course, each participant will have a notebook that they can use to continue to guide them as they strengthen their mental toughness long after the class is over.

Information, including cost, start date, and other details will be listed on the website and in a mailing as soon as they are determined. If you would like to be contacted directly about this opportunity, either call Dr. Moncier at 256-551-4479 or send an email to moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu.