

Optimal Performance Newsletter

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LEARNING TO FOCUS

- » *Focusing is a learned skill. It must be PRACTICED.*
- » *Telling yourself or someone else to “concentrate” or “focus” may be meaning less.*

Optimal Performance Consulting

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Focusing 101

The Foundation of Peak Performance

Sam Maniar, Ph.D.

The ability to focus is one of the foundations of peak performance. Without the ability to concentrate during distracting events, it can be difficult to succeed in sports. Focusing is also important for other mental skills, such as imagery. By learning to focus, you will be able to decrease your worry, decrease distractions, improve consistency of your performances, and be able to achieve the “zone” or “flow.”

Focusing can be defined as the uninterrupted connection between two things. When athletes are focused, they are only aware of those things that are critical to their performance. The individual and the performance become one; everything else is tuned out.

“What do I mean by concentration? I mean focusing totally on the business at hand, commanding your body to do exactly what you want it to do.” –Arnold Palmer

What some athletes and coaches do not understand, though, is that

focusing is a *learned* skill. Simply telling yourself to “concentrate” or “focus” is meaningless unless you have developed the skills necessary to do so.

In this issue of the *Optimal Performance Newsletter*, I will explore some strategies for improving one’s focus. But, as with all mental skills, I cannot stress enough that these skills must be practiced—just like the physical skills in your sport.

Focusing for beginners. If you are new to focus, try some of these strategies aimed at *learning* to focus:

- 1) Sit quietly, relax, and focus your eyes on some object, such as a blade of grass, flower, painting, someone’s face, etc. Really focus on it. What is unique about this object? Get absorbed in it.
- 2) Focus on an object, thought, or sound and then let your thoughts wander. Now re-focus on the original target.
- 3) In practice, take a moment to stand quietly, relax, and think about a particular skill. Imagine (and feel) its perfect execution. Now empty your mind (it may be helpful to imagine a dark room or a black screen going up). Now let your body perform that skill automatically.

Improving focus. Once you are able to do the three things above,

try these skills for *improving* your focus.

- 1) When stressed and/or nervous, try slowing everything down. Deliberately move slower, stretch slower, talk slower and breathe slower.
- 2) Practice shifting your focus from your body (i.e., form, what you're feeling, breathing) to your target.
- 3) Use cue words, such as "Let go," "Relax," or "Focus" to help keep your mind on target.

Quick tips for improving focus. Below, I have listed some "quick tips" to try in practice that will help your concentration. Pick a few to try.

- ▶ Practice with distractions present, and practice with pressure. Simulate competition (e.g., same preparation, playing, and post-game routines).
- ▶ Use self-talk cue words.
- ▶ Use objective and non-judgmental thinking during performances. Your thinking can directly impact physiology, mental state, and ultimately, performance.
- ▶ Establish and **practice** routines. Be consistent with your routine, and practice it during good and bad times.
- ▶ Identify distractions and plan for them ahead of time. In order to eliminate distractions, you must first identify what they are.
- ▶ Make a list of distractions that are out of your control ahead of

time. Now tear the list up. Focus on what you can control.

- ▶ Your mind follows your eyes, so keep your gaze focused only on task-relevant cues (e.g., ball, teammates, opponents).
- ▶ Stay in the here-and-now.
- ▶ Squash negative self-talk, and then flip it to the opposite or positive.
- ▶ Trust in yourself and your ability. This will allow you to let go and REACT (rather than over-think).
- ▶ After a penalty, take a deep breath, help your teammate, and refocus on the game/next play.

"What I tried to do was get them to walk away from confrontations and not let themselves be distracted. If somebody fouled them hard, I suggested turning around, taking a deep breath, and staying as composed as possible so they could keep their minds fixed on their goal: **victory.**" –Phil Jackson

- ▶ Remember and/or visualize your great plays and/or perfect performances. This will allow you to stay positive and focused.
- ▶ Remember why you play the game. When you can refocus on the "essence" of your sport and think about your love for it, great performance become possible.

▶ Distract the distraction. Fill your mind with positive, performance-relevant thoughts before the distracting thoughts can creep in. If you're focused on one thing (positive performance), you can't be focused on the opposite (negative performance) at the same time.

If you need help implementing any of the above skills, please contact us. Happy focusing!φ

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