

Optimal Performance Consulting

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Optimal Performance Newsletter

Using Imagery in Sport

Seeing is Believing

Sam Maniar, Ph.D.

In previous issues of the *Optimal Performance Newsletter*, I have addressed essential mental skills, such as goal setting and focusing. In this month's issue, I will cover another one of these "essential" skills: imagery. Imagery can help improve performance, quality of practice, learning of new skills, execution of learned skills, concentration, relaxation, confidence, recovery time from injury, energy level, and ability to cope with mistakes.

Many coaches and athletes have told me that they tried imagery but it didn't work. As with all mental skills, I must stress that imagery must be practiced over and over. It is no different than any physical skill in your sport. Additionally, it may be helpful for me to discuss what imagery is *not* before I continue.

Imagery: What it is NOT

Imagery is often seen as unhelpful because of certain misconceptions of what imagery is.

Imagery is NOT necessarily "seeing" or thinking about the outcome of an event. Imagery IS a conscious use of multiple senses during a deep state of relaxation in order to enhance

performance. In order for imagery to be effective you must relax first and quiet the "chatter" in your mind.

Imagery is NOT magic. This newsletter would not provide enough space for me to discuss the scientific studies and sports anecdotes that show the effectiveness of imagery. Let me just say, though, when practiced regularly, imagery can "trick" your body into believing it is actually performing what you are imagining. Simply put, vivid images (those that are detailed and involve multiple senses) produce measurable amounts of contraction in the muscles that are required to perform a skill.

Ten Essentials of Imagery

When using imagery, be sure to include the following essentials.

1) *Before starting your imagery session, make sure you are in a relaxed and focused state.* As stated above, you must first quiet your mind and relax your muscles in order for imagery to be effective.

2) *Try to incorporate as many senses as possible into your imagery session.* What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you feel (both internal feelings and external touch)? What do you taste? Specifically, try to incorporate the following types

of things: crowd, other competitors, whistles, cleats (sound); grass, locker room, smoke from gun (smell); slightly nervous, excited, equipment in your hands (feel); and salt on your lips, mouthpiece (taste).

3) *Include as much vivid detail as possible.* For example, see the whiteness of the chalk, designs/lines on the floor, colors of uniforms, etc.

4) *See the positive.* Negative imagery can be just as detrimental as positive imagery can be helpful. So, be sure that you are incorporating positive feelings, processes, reactions to mistakes, and outcomes in your imagery sessions. If you are having trouble seeing something, start with the basics. It may also be helpful to watch yourself or someone else on video over and over until you can capture the movement in your mind.

5) *Focus on the process necessary to achieve the desired outcome.* Seeing an outcome occur may help you with belief, but it is important (and more effective) to focus on the process of achieving an outcome. What do you need to do in order for that outcome to occur?

6) *Believe in, desire, and expect the outcome.* All three are essential and necessary. You must believe it is possible, desire it (as opposed to wanting it), and expect it.

7) *Be specific.* Be precise in all aspects of your game plan (e.g., time, when you will initiate a certain move or play, etc.)

8) *Be patient and consistent.* Remember, change takes time. Also, try to use imagery regularly (even if it just 5 minutes per day).

9) *Be ready for all weather and venue conditions.* If you have been to the competition site, you are at a distinct advantage. Incorporate these details into your sessions. Additionally, look at the weather forecast, and be prepared for various conditions.

10) *Practice, practice, practice.* Enough said.

Imagery Uses

Now that we have the basics of imagery down, I thought I'd explore potential applications of imagery in sport.

➤ Any time you want to intensify relaxation.

➤ Prior to practices, in order to increase the chances of a good workout.

➤ Prior to competitions, in order to increase the chances of a good performance.

➤ Whenever you find yourself performing well in practice but end up doing poor in competition. Start visualizing yourself performing in practice and slowly add components of competition (one teammate, coach, one opponent, a few people in the crowd, etc).

➤ **Prior to** practices and competitions, in order to be ready for all weather/venue conditions.

➤ **During** a performance, in order to help overcome obstacles.

➤ To correct a technical or tactical mistake **directly after** it has occurred.

➤ To recapture the feeling of a great performance in order to increase confidence.

➤ To help improve the learning of new skills.

➤ Any time you want additional practice of already learned skills.φ



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