

Focusing on Success: Practical Techniques for Improving Concentration Skills in Athletes

(SportTracker, City West, 25 July 2009)

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Sport is played with body but won in mind ...



Concentration, or ability to focus on task at hand, can mean difference between winning and losing in sport (e.g. Matt Emmons 2004/2008 Olympics)



Coaches on concentration



"90 minutes is a long time ... and that's why the players' concentration is vital. Without question, at the top level, concentration is a big part of a player's game" (Alex Ferguson, 2009)



If concentration is so important, why do athletes/coaches not work on it more?

- One theory - you can't change it
e.g., Ronnie O'Sullivan: "If you're on, you're on ... if you're off, you're off: There's nothing you can do about it"
- But you CAN...
e.g., Case of Bjorn Borg? Learned to control his temper and focus better at age 12 ...

Remember: Success comes in CANS not CANT's



"Concentrate!"

- Why does this command rarely work?
- Although it may encourage you to try harder, it doesn't tell you *exactly* what you need to do ...
- So, what should you focus on?



What winners focus on: McGinley (2002)

"At no time did I consider the mechanics of the stroke. Of course, I knew what the putt meant ... but I became **absorbed in the line of the putt**. I could see it exactly from beginning to end. **My only job at that moment was to set the ball off on the line that I had chosen. That was the only thing I could control!**"



What this quote tells us

- To focus properly, you need a **specific target** and **jobs** that are under your control
- When concentrating under pressure, it is **dangerous to think too much** about the importance or mechanics of the skill
- You need to **clear your mind** of all distracting thoughts ... or else (recall Roger Loughran, 2005, "Central House", Leopardstown)



O'Gara on last minute drop goal against Wales (2009)



"I picked out three numbers in the stand behind the posts. I can still picture them perfectly. That was my target. I visualised the ball going through and kept that image ... One chance"



Plan

1. What is "concentration"? Why do athletes lose it so easily?
2. Practical focusing techniques



Part 1. What is concentration?

Ability to focus on the task at hand while ignoring distractions - part of what we call "paying attention"

- What is best way to understand concentration?
- Are there different types of concentration?
- What are the building blocks of a focused mind?
- Why do players lose their concentration so easily?



(i) Selective attention



Ability to "zoom in" on one thing (e.g., the ball) while ignoring everything else



Focusing on actions: Michael Johnson

"I have learned to cut out all unnecessary thoughts ... on the track. I simply concentrate. **I concentrate on the tangible - on the track, on the race, on the blocks, on the things I have to do.** The crowd fades away and the other athletes disappear and now it's just me and this one lane" (winner of 9 world championship/Olympic gold medals)



(ii) Divided attention - ability to perform **two or more concurrent skills** equally well



How good are you at dividing attention?

- While sitting down, lift your right foot off the floor and make clockwise circles with it.
- Then, while doing this, draw the number “6” in the air with your right hand.
- Notice that your foot will change direction - and there is nothing you can do about it!



(iii) Concentration - **exerting deliberate mental effort** on what is most important to us (e.g., listening to coach’s instructions)



Concentration as a mental spotlight

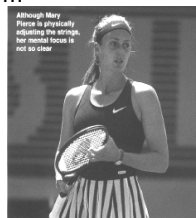
Concentration is like a mental spotlight that we shine at what we’re interested in



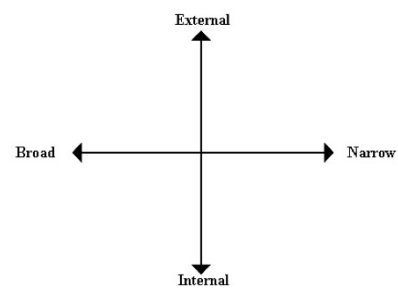
Practical implications of spotlight theory

We’re in control of what we focus on - so, where is your spotlight shining now?

We cannot “lose” our concentration - but we can shine it at the “wrong” target ...



Four targets for your spotlight



4 different types of focus in football

- Broad external - midfielder scanning the pitch before passing the ball
- Broad internal - imagining an opponent's style of play as you prepare for a game
- Narrow external - goalkeeper focusing on a ball coming into penalty area from corner kick
- Narrow internal - reminding yourself of the direction you've chosen as you step up to a penalty



Concentration building blocks

- (i) You have to deliberately *decide* to concentrate, it won't just happen by chance
- Ronan O'Gara (Irish and Lions rugby) "I have to be focused. I have to do my mental preparation. I have to feel that I'm ready"
 - Coaching tip: Work out a "switch on" zone for your players (e.g., leaving dressing room)



Switching on your concentration

"Concentration's like a shower. You don't turn it on until you want to bathe ... You don't walk out of the shower and leave it running. **You turn it off, you turn it on** ... It has to be fresh and ready when you need it" (Garry Sobers, cricket, 2002)

- Martin Corry (former England rugby captain) "I used to like switching the dressing-room light off, to signify the end of our preparation and the start of something new" (2007)
- Note how tennis players use imaginary lines behind baseline of court to switch on and switch off



- (ii) We can concentrate on only *one thought at a time* (our working memory is fragile and limited in duration - e.g., hard to remember name of someone you've just been introduced to ...)

- Michael Phelps (US Olympic record-holding swimmer): "You have to go one day at a time, one meet at a time and one practice at a time"



- (iii) Our minds are focused properly when we there is no difference between what we are *thinking* and what we are *doing*

To do this, you need to focus on specific targets that are under your control (e.g., get tight on opponent, pass and go)

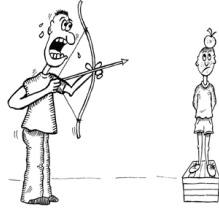


- (iv) We need to *re-focus regularly* to keep our minds on track - otherwise our mental spotlight will wander

- Players need constant reminders about what exactly to focus on



(v) Anxiety narrows our concentration beam and causes us to *focus inwards* so we should try to focus outwards when we're nervous

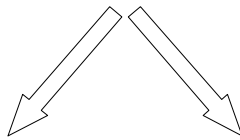


Summary: Building blocks of good concentration

- You have to *decide* to concentrate - make it happen
- Be single-minded - one thought at a time
- Your mind is focused when you're doing what you're thinking
- Keep your mind on track - re-focus when necessary
- Focus outwards when you get nervous



Why do we lose focus? Distractions



External

Gamesmanship,
Noise (e.g., Galatasary),
Spectators

Internal

Thinking too far ahead,
Fear of making a
mistake



Part 2 Focusing techniques

- Restructuring - breaking game down into sections
- Developing routines (e.g., after mistakes)
- Using your imagination: Seeing and feeling your next action
- Using trigger words
- Setting performance goals for yourself
- Simulation training



(i) Restructuring the game

Good coaches break a game/event into different sections (e.g., "half time thinking" - see Liverpool vs AC Milan, 3-0 at half-time...)

• Similarly, golf is not a game of 18-holes or a competition against others ...

• Instead, **it's a single task performed repeatedly:** The challenge is against yourself - **to hit a specific target** every time (like darts or archery)



(ii) Developing routines

Routines are sequences of steps (thoughts and actions) which take you from thinking to action



Combining techniques: O'Gara



"It was obvious how important it was, but I just had to get into my routine and block everything else out. Usually, there's a mark in the centre of the crossbar and I focus on that. I imagine a little hoop between the sticks, like a gymnasium hoop, and I picture the ball going through that. I stepped back and the buzz words in my mind were, 'Stay tall, follow through'"



(iii) Using your imagination

"I've had a few strange looks when people see me in the car with my head nodding from side to side as I catch crosses in my imagination but I firmly believe that it is part of the repetitive process that every sportsman requires"



(iv) Using trigger words

Short, vivid verbal reminders to focus on a specific target

- Serena Williams read trigger word notes during "change overs" in 2002 final against Venus
- "Low to high"
- "Up with play"
- "100% effort"



(v) Setting performance goals

Top players set performance or action goals for themselves before they compete

- "First serve in"
- "Up with play"
- "100% effort"



(vi) Simulation training

Training under distracting conditions in practice so that you get used to them in matches

- Gamesmanship
- Playing with one player less
- Fatigue
- Unfavourable ref decisions



Further reading

Kremer, J., and Moran, A. (2008). *Pure Sport: Practical Sport Psychology*. London: Routledge.

