



Sport Psych Manitoba

“Imagination is more important than knowledge” – Einstein

Athletes frequently cite using the mental skill of imagery to enhance their performance. Sport psychologists have found that athletes at higher competitive levels (i.e., national and international) are better at imagery, meaning their imagery has a greater impact on their performance, than athletes of lower competitive levels (i.e., recreational or club). Imagery may be defined as:

“...an experience that mimics real experience. We can be aware of ‘seeing’ an image, feeling movements as an image, or experiencing an image of smell, tastes, or sounds without actually experiencing the real thing...It differs from dreams in that we are awake and conscious when we form an image” (White & Hardy, 1998).

For example, an athlete may imagine the emotions of standing on the podium at the Olympic Games, they may hear the sound of O’Canada on the sound system, imagine the feel of the medal around their neck and even use their sense of smell to imagine the scent of the bouquet in their hands. Though most athletes will not have the opportunity of the Olympic experience it is likely many have played a similar scene in their mind. Although it is easier to form an image of something we have previously experienced it is not a necessary condition. In other words we can imagine things that we have not physically experienced.

As with physical skills mental skills take time and effort to learn. Practicing mental skills, including imagery, prior to integrating them into competition will help the athlete use them effectively. Since imagery rehearsal requires considerable concentration it can be fatiguing. When first learning to use imagery athletes may only image for a few minutes at a time, they may need to close their eyes to help

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block out distractions, and will probably find imagery easier if they do it in a quiet space. As athletes learn to use imagery it will become easier for them to do and often athletes can be seen using imagery as part of their pre-competition routine during their warm-up and between attempts or shifts in a competition. This imagery is often brief and athletes may form images of specific sport skills (e.g., a free throw in basketball), imagine overcoming a difficult situation (e.g., cycling in the rain), regulating their emotions or arousal (e.g., being calm and in control when serving for the win in volleyball), rehearse strategies or routines (e.g., a floor routine in gymnastics), and to see the outcome they are trying to achieving (e.g., attaining a personal best time in swimming).

Coaches can encourage athletes to use imagery before, during and after competitions and training sessions. Imagery helps athletes prepare for what they are about to do, gives them confidence, and helps them to learn and refine skills and strategies. Coaches may provide opportunities in the practice environment for athletes to use imagery, they can remind athletes to use imagery and recommend what images they may find helpful, and athletes should also be encouraged to include imagery in their pre-competition and competition routines. Though athletes are able to form images of experiences they have not yet had it is usually easiest when first learning to image to begin by practicing something familiar. For example, the athlete may practice imaging something familiar like an object used in their sport (e.g., a baseball glove), then they may imagine the practice environment, from this image they might include dynamic components such as athlete-coach interactions in the practice setting, or making a play with a team mate. Once the athlete is comfortable using imagery in the practice setting they should be encouraged to begin using it in competition settings. The introduction of imagery is best done during the

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pre-season when athletes can begin practicing their imagery skills, integrate them into competitions during the pre-competitive phase and adjust their imagery use so it is most effective during the competition phase.

Imagery is most effective when a combination of senses are used, i.e., visual, audio, olfactory, touch, and kinaesthetic (movement of the body). Most often athletes report using visual followed by kinaesthetic images. Athletes use both an internal imagery perspective, as though they were physically doing the sport and looking out from their own eyes, and an external imagery perspective, imaging from a third person perspective as when watching a video. Most athletes prefer one perspective over another, though athletes should be encouraged to use various perspectives, in order to gain the most benefit from the image, one perspective is not better than the other. Coaches and athletes should consider the nature of the sport and the information they are trying to gain from an image when selecting a perspective. Sport skills that rely on perceptual information, such as a pass in soccer, generally benefit from an internal imagery perspective, in this example an athlete would gain information from the image about where the players from both teams are in relation to them and may find an internal perspective most effective for decision-making. In contrast, sport skills that depend on technical form and precise body movements, such as diving, benefit most from an external perspective. For form-based sports the athlete needs information including the relationship of their body segments to space and to each other. An internal perspective would not be as useful as an external perspective as athletes would get limited information such as the water in the dive tank rushing toward them. Regardless of the perspective an athlete prefers they should be able to both see and feel the images they create.

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Most athletes are able to use imagery to some degree but the effectiveness of that imagery can be enhanced leading to more positive sport experiences including improved confidence and skill acquisition. Simply providing opportunities in training sessions for athletes to practice imagery (e.g., while waiting for their turn or while warming up) and encouraging them to use imagery can be an important first step. Gradually integrate imagery into the training and competition environment, remind athletes to use visual and kinaesthetic senses, and suggest they use an internal or external perspective given the nature of the sport skill. Applying these suggestions will help athletes get the effects they want from imagery, a skill they likely already do!

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