

FOCUS!

By Susan Ellis



Consider this:

You are in the most important race of your life. You are the CEO of your performance. As CEO, you are in charge of your ability to control your thoughts, emotions, energy, and confidence level. How well you administer the company, called My Mind, My Body, My Race, will determine the outcome of the race. Hopefully, as a highly proficient CEO you will have researched every angle of the performance of your company and know exactly what your company needs to do to perform its best. You have a well-developed and rehearsed game plan. You have back up plans. You have seen this race a hundred times in your mind. You know exactly how you will feel going to the start line. You know exactly what you will be saying to yourself. You have worked through the feeling of dealing with fatigue, corrected possible mistakes, made great passes, keeping unnecessary and interfering emotion in check.

OK. Let's back up a bit. Unless you are the one who created this great company, chances are you are not going to get to be CEO fresh out of school. You will have had to work your way up in businesses, dealt with many different scenarios, problem solved, assessed, evaluated, changed, and corrected performance errors along the way. You will have learned from every big decision you have made. You will have planned and assessed every detail, big and small, that contributed to your performance either good or bad, and know what to do with that now. You are in control. That's how you get to be CEO!

Training your mind is as important as training your body. Mental training to reduce stress, control emotions, develop coping mechanisms is what allows your mind to be clear enough to make clear and rational decisions in racing. It is what allows us to pay attention to every detail and FOCUS on the task at hand and what goes into winning the race.

Sport is like taking a picture just before the battery on your phone dies only to find out the photo is out of focus. You can't go back and re-take the photo. You lose your focus in a race, even for a split second, and you could lose the race. There is no going back and correcting the image to bring it back into focus, just like there is no going back in your race and fixing the loss of focus that caused the mistake. It's over and done. You're stuck with it.

Mental training tools include such things as imagery and visualization, controlled breathing, centering, learning ideal performance states, controlling performance anxiety, positive self-talk and even hypnosis. There is a ton of literature available on the web and many great books for you to learn these important skills. But the first thing all of

these require to be able to practice them effectively is focus. That is – the skill must have your full and undivided attention for you to be able to accomplish the exercises to learn the skill. And learning to focus takes practice. Learning to stay focused on a task for extended periods takes even more practice and requires concentration. Concentration is defined as ‘the process by which all thoughts and senses are focused totally upon a selected object or activity to the exclusion of everything else.’

When I'm on the mound, I'm so locked in I don't even see the dugout. It's just me and the glove. There's no way I can hear what's going on in the bleachers.

~ Major League Baseball pitcher Roger Clemens

The first thing you need in learning to improve your focus is commitment. In order to improve your commitment you need to identify what areas need improvement, when your focus is good (quiet setting, fresh legs, beginning of practice) and when your focus is not good (noise, anxiety, pain).

For example:

My focus and concentration are good when _____

My focus and concentration are not good when _____

I would like to be able to focus better in these situations: ie (long laps, distractions by friends) _____

After identifying when you have good focus and when you need to improve, you can then learn how to control your concentration. You can start with an easy task such as sitting in basic position. Let me re-phrase that – not just basic position, but the perfect, ideal, zoned in, position where there are no distractions permitted (by you, the CEO), because you choose not to let distractions in. That means no sound, no varying the position, no varying the gaze (where you are looking), and no friends distracting (even though they may try). Think of nothing but the position, and how good it feels to skate in this ideal position in this ideal state of mind. Try it for only 30 seconds at a time at first and gradually build on it. Set a goal on how long you want to be able to ultimately hold the position without losing focus.

One common mistake made in practicing the basic position is that coaches and athletes just sit there and don't relate it to ice and the 'feel' of skating in that position. You always want to reinforce “this is me, this is how I skate”. Do some positive self-talk while in the position to reinforce technical aspects of it, ie hips under, knees forward; as well as words of strength and reassurance. Find ways to block the pain and replace that negative feeling with a positive feeling of being strong. That way you take a specific mental practice, combined with a specific skill task back on to the ice with you.

Once you have mastered the simple task of being in basic position and controlling your focus the entire time, introduce some distractions. Have people talk to you, jostle you, do it balancing on a 2 x 4 piece of wood, a really cold room, a really hot room, when you are super tired. From here you can then start to introduce training imagery into the mix. See yourself on ice doing long laps or sprint laps in total control of the image and feeling

you want, with your gaze on the ice in front of you. Again, start out with short time frames and gradually increase the time frames. Once you have mastered this, then start to introduce race imagery. Again the focus is only on the ideal position and the feeling of that position, not on passing, blocking, etc, yet. You can put other racers in your imagery but nothing fancy in the race yet. One of the most common mistakes people make in learning imagery is to try to visualize the entire race when they haven't yet mastered the concentration skills to focus for the entire race. Somewhere along the way the mind wandered and you lost the feeling you wanted. Keep it short and simple enough to accomplish the mission at first. Once you can do this, then you will have the focus and concentration skills to introduce passing, blocking, different tracks, what ifs, into your visualization. Eventually you will want to bring different distractions into your routine and learn to control the anxiety that comes with these distractions, ie: broken blade, toughest heat possible, feeling sick, poor previous race.

Emotions play an important part in attention control and focus. Anger, anxiety, fear tend to distract us from the focus goal. How we control these emotions, and how quickly we can rein them in, will impact how quickly we regain focus and control. This is where learning to relax with controlled breathing along with confident, powerful cue words and thoughts, positive imagery, and centering can help to calm you and put you back in a state where you are in control of your focus, attention, and thoughts, so the distraction does not control you.

Assessment is important in helping to improve for each subsequent session. Write down how long you were able to maintain focus, keep the image, keep the feeling, etc. What were your cues, thoughts, words? What, if anything, distracted you? Were you able to refocus if you did happen to get distracted? Goals for the next session?

Practice focusing in other scenarios besides skating training, such as the classroom. How long can you make the words of the teacher your one and only focus. How long can you internalize and make those words part of you, and you and the teacher are the only ones in the classroom.

Do not dwell in the past; do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment.

~ Buddha

Sports psychologist Tami Eggleston summarizes the literature on attention and concentration with the following acronym:

- F=Fuel your desire—Know your motivation and goals—keep up the passion
- O=Optimal energy—Know appropriate arousal/relaxation levels for best performance
- C=Consistency—Know the importance of practice and routines
- U=Understand your natural strengths and areas of improvement
- S=Shift Gears—Know when you need to mentally shift gears and work on controlling your attention

Further reading:

Coping With Pre-Competition Nervousness

(<http://socialanxietydisorder.about.com/od/copingwithsad/a/sportstrategies.htm>)

Sports Coach: Psychology

(<http://www.brianmac.co.uk/psych.htm>)

Mental Drills

(<https://www.peakendurancesport.com/endurance-psychology/mental-drills/>)

One Mental Game Skill All Athletes Must Have

(<https://www.peaksports.com/sports-psychology-blog/tag/improving-concentration-in-sports/>)

3 Ways to Improve Focus in Sports

(<https://www.activekids.com/parenting-and-family/articles/3-ways-to-improve-focus-in-sports>)

The Nine Mental Skills of Successful Athletes

(<https://www.sportpsych.org/nine-mental-skills-overview>)

Sport Imagery: Athletes' Most Powerful Mental Tool

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-power-prime/201211/sport-imagery-athletes-most-powerful-mental-tool>)