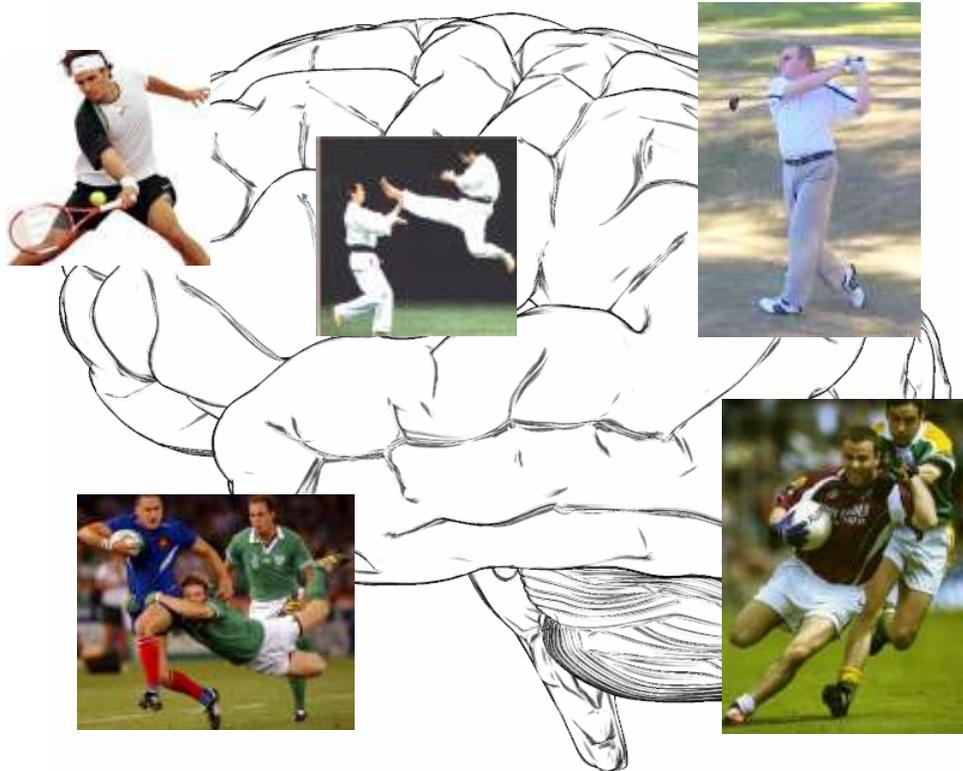


MAC Complementary Health Clinic

**Introduction to
The MIND of Sports Psychology.**



Introduction to Sports Psychology



Your body is a mass of muscles and nerves linked together into the central processing unit that is your brain. This series of articles on sports psychology seeks to show you how to use that central processing unit to its greatest effect in controlling your body to give optimum sporting performance.

The section takes two separate approaches:

- A tools based approach explaining the three fundamental sports psychology tools:
 - Goal Setting
 - Imagery and Simulation
 - Flow and Flow Control
- An application based approach explaining how to use the tools to their maximum effect.

Enjoy the Mind Sports Psychology - lessons you can learn here apply to high performance living both inside and outside sport.

Deciding Your Commitment

Deciding your commitment to your sport is possibly the most important 'Sports Psychology' decision you will make.

If all you want out of sport is a bit of relaxed fun, then your approach should be entirely different from someone who wants to reach the top. It is important to realize that excellence demands complete dedication: if you want to be a top athlete, then training to be a top athlete must be the most important thing in your life. If your career or family are more important than your sport, then you will find it difficult to devote the time and dedication you need to achieve excellence to the sport, unless you have a very sympathetic boss or family.

Once you have decided how committed you are, adjust your training and expectations appropriately.

Personal Goal Setting



Find Direction. Live Your Life Your Way.

Goal setting is a powerful process for thinking about your ideal future, and for motivating yourself to turn this vision of the future into reality.

The process of setting goals helps you choose where you want to go in life. By knowing precisely what you want to achieve, you know where you have to concentrate your efforts. You'll also quickly spot the distractions that would otherwise lure you from your course.

More than this, properly-set goals can be incredibly motivating, and as you get into the habit of setting and achieving goals, you'll find that your self-confidence builds fast.

Achieving More With Focus

Goal setting techniques are used by top-level athletes, successful business-people and achievers in all fields. They give you long-term vision and short-term motivation. They focus your acquisition of knowledge and help you to organize your time and your resources so that you can make the very most of your life.

By setting sharp, clearly defined goals, you can measure and take pride in the achievement of those goals. You can see forward progress in what might previously have seemed a long pointless grind. By setting goals, you will also raise your self-confidence, as you recognize your ability and competence in achieving the goals that you have set.

Starting to Set Personal Goals

Goals are set on a number of different levels: First you create your "big picture" of what you want to do with your life, and decide what large-scale goals you want to achieve. Second, you break these down into the smaller and smaller targets that you must hit so that you reach your lifetime goals. Finally, once you have your plan, you start working to achieve it.

We start this process with your Lifetime Goals, and work down to the things you can do today to start moving towards them.

Your Lifetime Goals

The first step in setting personal goals is to consider what you want to achieve in your lifetime (or by a time at least, say, 10 years in the future) as setting Lifetime Goals gives you the overall perspective that shapes all other aspects of your decision making.

To give a broad, balanced coverage of all important areas in your life, try to set goals in some of these categories (or in categories of your own, where these are important to you):

- **Artistic:**
Do you want to achieve any artistic goals? If so, what?
- **Attitude:**
Is any part of your mindset holding you back? Is there any part of the way that you behave that upsets you? If so, set a goal to improve your behavior or find a solution to the problem.
- **Career:**
What level do you want to reach in your career?
- **Education:**
Is there any knowledge you want to acquire in particular? What information and skills will you need to achieve other goals?
- **Family:**
Do you want to be a parent? If so, how are you going to be a good parent? How do you want to be seen by a partner or by members of your extended family?
- **Financial:**
How much do you want to earn by what stage?
- **Physical:**
Are there any athletic goals you want to achieve, or do you want good health deep into old age? What steps are you going to take to achieve this?
- **Pleasure:**
How do you want to enjoy yourself? - You should ensure that some of your life is for you!
- **Public Service:**
Do you want to make the world a better place? If so, how?

Spend some time brainstorming these, and then select one goal in each category that best reflects what you want to do. Then consider trimming again so that you have a small number of really significant goals on which you can focus.

As you do this, make sure that the goals that you have set are ones that you genuinely want to achieve, not ones that your parents, family, or employers might want (if you have a partner, you probably want to consider what he or she wants, however make sure you also remain true to yourself!)

Starting to Achieve Your Lifetime Goals

Once you have set your lifetime goals, set a 25 year plan of smaller goals that you should complete if you are to reach your lifetime plan. Then set a 5 year plan, 1 year plan, 6 month plan, and 1 month plan of progressively smaller goals that you should reach to achieve your lifetime goals. Each of these should be based on the previous plan.

Then create a daily to-do list of things that you should do today to work towards your lifetime goals. At an early stage these goals may be to read books and gather information on the achievement of your goals. This will help you to improve the quality and realism of your goal setting.

Finally review your plans, and make sure that they fit the way in which you want to live your life.

Staying on Course



Once you have decided your first set of plans, keep the process going by reviewing and updating your to-do list on a daily basis. Periodically review the longer term plans, and modify them to reflect your changing priorities and experience.

Goal Setting Tips

The following broad guidelines will help you to set effective goals:

- *State each goal as a positive statement:* Express your goals positively – 'Execute this technique well' is a much better goal than 'Don't make this stupid mistake.'
- *Be precise:* Set a precise goal, putting in dates, times and amounts so that you can measure achievement. If you do this, you will know exactly when

you have achieved the goal, and can take complete satisfaction from having achieved it.

- *Set priorities:* When you have several goals, give each a priority. This helps you to avoid feeling overwhelmed by too many goals, and helps to direct your attention to the most important ones.
- *Write goals down:* This crystallizes them and gives them more force.
- *Keep operational goals small:* Keep the low-level goals you are working towards small and achievable. If a goal is too large, then it can seem that you are not making progress towards it. Keeping goals small and incremental gives more opportunities for reward. Derive today's goals from larger ones.
- *Set performance goals, not outcome goals:* You should take care to set goals over which you have as much control as possible. There is nothing more dispiriting than failing to achieve a personal goal for reasons beyond your control. In business, these could be bad business environments or unexpected effects of government policy. In sport, for example, these reasons could include poor judging, bad weather, injury, or just plain bad luck. If you base your goals on personal performance, then you can keep control over the achievement of your goals and draw satisfaction from them.
- *Set realistic goals:* It is important to set goals that you can achieve. All sorts of people (employers, parents, media, society) can set unrealistic goals for you. They will often do this in ignorance of your own desires and ambitions. Alternatively you may set goals that are too high, because you may not appreciate either the obstacles in the way or understand quite how much skill you need to develop to achieve a particular level of performance.

SMART Goals:

A useful way of making goals more powerful is to use the SMART mnemonic. While there are plenty of variants, SMART usually stands for:

- **S** Specific
- **M** Measurable
- **A** Attainable
- **R** Relevant
- **T** Time-bound

For example, instead of having “to sail around the world” as a goal, it is more powerful to say “To have completed my trip around the world by December 31, 2015.” Obviously, this will only be attainable if a lot of preparation has been completed beforehand!

Achieving Goals

When you have achieved a goal, take the time to enjoy the satisfaction of having done so. Absorb the implications of the goal achievement, and observe the progress you have made towards other goals. If the goal was a significant one, reward yourself appropriately. All of this helps you build the self-confidence you deserve!

With the experience of having achieved this goal, review the rest of your goal plans:

- If you achieved the goal too easily, make your next goals harder.
- If the goal took a dispiriting length of time to achieve, make the next goals a little easier.
- If you learned something that would lead you to change other goals, do so.
- If you noticed a deficit in your skills despite achieving the goal, decide whether to set goals to fix this.

Failure to meet goals does not matter much, as long as you learn from it. Feed lessons learned back into your goal setting program.

Remember too that your goals will change as time goes on. Adjust them regularly to reflect growth in your knowledge and experience, and if goals do not hold any attraction any longer, then let them go.

Key Points

Goal setting is an important method of:

- Deciding what is important for you to achieve in your life.
- Separating what is important from what is irrelevant, or a distraction.
- Motivating yourself.
- Building your self-confidence, based on successful achievement of goals.

If you don't already set goals, do so, starting now. As you make this technique part of your life, you'll find your career accelerating, and you'll wonder how you did without it!

Deciding Your Goals

Your Commitment to the Sport

The first step in setting sporting goals is to decide your level of commitment to your sport. If you want nothing more than a bit of fun every now and again, then you should have different goals from someone who has decided to dedicate his or her life to achieving excellence in the sport.

This decision about commitment will allow you to assess whether you 'own' the goals towards which you are currently working - do you want to achieve at this level, or are you being pushed by your parents or coach into a daily grind which you are not enjoying?

Skills to be Mastered

Once you have decided your level of commitment to the sport, the next stage is to analyze either the sport, or the position you play in a team sport. Work out the skills that you will need to have mastered to attain the level you want to reach within the sport. Understand what lies behind the performances exhibited by people operating at that level in the sport.

Your Goals in Life

Before you actually set any sporting goals, it is worth considering what your life goals are, so that you can further assess your commitment to the sport in the context of your career, relationships, ongoing education, and other facets of your life.

Setting Goals Effectively



The way in which you set goal strongly affects their effectiveness.

Before you start to set goals, you should have set the background of goal setting by:

- understanding your commitment to the sport
- understanding the level you want to reach within the sport
- knowing the skills that will have to be acquired and the levels of performance that will be needed
- know where this will fit into your overall life goals

These were discussed in the previous section.

General Guidelines

The following broad guidelines apply to setting effective goals:

- **Positive Statement:** express your goals positively: 'To execute this technique perfectly' is a much better goal than 'don't make this stupid mistake'
- **Be Precise:** if you set a precise goal, putting in dates, times and amounts so that achievement can be measured, then you know the exact goal to be achieved, and can take complete satisfaction from having completely achieved it.
- **Set Priorities:** where you have several goals, give each a priority. This helps you to avoid feeling overwhelmed by too many goals, and helps to direct your attention to the most important ones.
- **Write goals down** to avoid confusion and give them more force.
- **Keep Operational Goals Small:** Keep the goals you are working towards immediately (i.e. in this session) small and achievable. If a goal is too large, then it can seem that you are not making progress towards it. Keeping goals small and incremental gives more opportunities for reward. Today's goals should be derived from larger goals.

Important Points

A number of general principles should be noted about goal setting:

Set Performance, not Outcome Goals

This is *very* important. You should take care to set goals over which you have as much control as possible - there is nothing as dispiriting as failing to achieve a personal goal for reasons beyond your control such as poor judging, bad weather, injury, excellence in other athletes, or just plain bad luck. Goals based on outcomes are extremely vulnerable to things beyond your control.

If you base your goals on personal performance targets or skills to be acquired, then you can keep control over the achievement of your goals and draw satisfaction from them. For example, you might achieve a personal best time, but still be disqualified as a result of a poor judging decision. If you set an outcome goal of being in the top three, then this will be a defeat. If you set a performance goal of achieving a particular time, then you will have achieved the goal and can draw satisfaction and self-confidence from its achievement.

Another flaw is where outcome goals are based on the rewards of winning, whether these are financial or are based on the recognition of being a winner. In early stages these will be highly motivating factors, however as they are achieved, the benefit of winning another prize or championship at the same level reduces. You will become progressively less motivated.

One difficulty you will face is that people who are ignorant of sports psychology, such as many poor coaches, parents, media, fans, etc. base their assessment of success on winning. This completely ignores the effect of raw luck on high quality performance. As with many things, stick with what you know is right rather than what uninformed people think.

Set Specific Goals

Set specific measurable goals. If you achieve all conditions of a measurable goal, then you can be confident and comfortable in its achievement. If you consistently fail to meet a measurable goal, then you can adjust it or analyze the reason for failure and take appropriate action to improve skills.

Set Realistic Goals

Goals may be set unrealistically high for the following reasons:

- Other people: Other people (fans, parents, media) can set unrealistic goals for you, based on what they want. Often this will be done in ignorance of your goals and training programs.
- Insufficient information: If you do not have a clear, realistic understanding of your sport and of the techniques and performance to be mastered, it is difficult to set effective and realistic goals.
- Always expecting your best performance: Many people base their goals on their best performance, however long ago that was. This ignores the inevitable backsliding that can occur for good reasons, and ignores the factors that led to that best performance. It is better to set goals that raise your average performance and make it more consistent.
- Lack of respect for self: If you do not respect your right to rest, relaxation and pleasure in life then you risk burnout.

Setting Goals Too Low



Alternatively goals can be set too low because of:

- Fear of failure: If you are frightened of failure you will not take the risks needed for optimum performance. As you apply goal setting and see the achievement of goals, your self-confidence should increase, helping you to take bigger risks. Know that failure is a positive

thing: it shows you areas where you can improve your skills and performance.

- Taking it too easy: It is easy to take the reasons for not setting goals unrealistically high as an excuse to set them too low. If you're not prepared to stretch yourself and work hard, then you are extremely unlikely to achieve anything of any real worth.

Setting Goals at the Right Level

Setting goals at the correct level is a skill that is acquired by practice.

You should set goals so that they are slightly out of your immediate grasp, but not so far that there is no hope of achieving them: no-one will put serious effort into achieving a goal that they believe is unrealistic. However, remember that the belief that a goal is unrealistic may be incorrect. Such a belief can be changed by effective use of imagery.

Personal factors such as tiredness, injury, stage in the season, etc. should be taken into account when goals are set.

Now try setting some goals, and then measure them against the points above. Adjust them to meet the recommendations and then review them. You should now be able to see the importance of setting goals effectively.

Where Goal Setting Can Go Wrong

Goal setting can go wrong for a number of reasons:

- Outcome goals can be set instead of performance goals. Where an athlete using outcome goals fails to achieve the goal for reasons outside his or her control, this can be very dispiriting and can lead to loss of enthusiasm and feelings of failure. Always set performance goals.
- Goals can be set unrealistically high. When a goal is perceived to be unreachable, no effort will be made to achieve it. Set realistic goals.

- Conversely goals can be set so low that the athlete feels no challenge of benefit in achieving the goal. Setting goals has been a waste of time. Always set goals that are challenging.
- Goals can be so vague that they are useless: it is difficult to know whether vague goals have been achieved. If achievement cannot be measured, then your self-confidence will not benefit from goal setting, nor can you observe progress towards a greater goal. Set precise, quantitative goals.
- Goal setting can be unsystematic, sporadic and disorganized. Here goals will be forgotten, achievement of goals will not be measured, and feedback will not occur into new goals. The major benefits of goal setting have been lost. Be organised and regular in the way that you use goal setting.
- Too many goals may be set, leading to a feeling of overload. Remember that you deserve time to relax and enjoy being human.

Where goal setting does go wrong, not only are the benefits of goal setting lost, but the whole process of goal setting can fall into disrepute.

By avoiding these problems, and setting goals effectively as described in the previous article, you can achieve and maintain strong forward momentum.

Achieving Goals and Feedback

Achieving Goals



When you have achieved a goal, take the time to enjoy the satisfaction of having achieved the goal. Absorb the implications of the goal achievement, and observe the progress you have made towards other goals.

If the goal was a significant one, or one that you had worked towards for some time, take the opportunity to reward yourself appropriately.

Feedback: Failure

Where you have failed to reach a goal, ensure that you learn the lessons of the failure. These may be:

- that you didn't try hard enough
- that your technique was faulty and needs to be adjusted
- that the goal you set was unrealistic
- etc.

Use this information to adjust the goal if it was set too high, or to set goals to acquire new skills or build stamina. Feeding back like this turns everything into a positive learning experience - even failing to meet a goal is a step forward towards perfect technique!

Remember that the fact of trying something, even if it does not work, often opens doors that would otherwise have remained closed.

Feedback: Success

Where you have achieved a goal this should feed back into your next goals:

- If the goal was easily achieved, make your next goals harder
- If the goal took a dispiriting length of time to achieve, make the next goals a little easier
- If you learned something that would lead you to change goals still outstanding, do so
- If while achieving the goal you noticed a deficit in your skills, set goals to fix this.

Remember too that goals change as you mature - adjust them regularly to reflect this growth in your personality. If goals do not hold any attraction any longer, then let them go - goal setting is your servant, not your master. It should bring you real pleasure, satisfaction and achievement.

Summary of Goal Setting

This section has shown that:

- Goal setting is an important method of:
 - Deciding how committed you are to your sport
 - Deciding what is important for you to achieve, and what is irrelevant
 - Motivating yourself to achievement
 - Building your self-confidence based on measured achievement of goals
- You can set goals effectively by:
 - Phrasing them positively
 - Defining them precisely
 - Prioritising multiple goals
 - Writing them down
 - Keeping them manageable: Not too hard, but not too easy.
 - Setting performance goals, not outcome goals

- Failure in meeting goals is useful in improving technique and long term success as long as you draw useful lessons from it and feed these back into your training program.
- You should allow yourself to enjoy the achievement of goals and reward yourself appropriately. Lessons should be drawn where appropriate, and should be fed back into training.

As a final point, if you do not already set goals, or if you have not yet focused on your life goals, now is a great time to start!

Introduction to Imagery and Simulation

Background

Imagination...



Imagine the possibilities!

Your body is a beautifully evolved sporting machine, comprising, among other things, muscles that can be trained to a peak of fitness and nerves that control the muscles. The nerves are massively linked in your brain: vast numbers of nerve cells are linked with a hugely greater number of interconnections.

Part of the reason that human children take so long to reach maturity relative to animals is that we have many more nerve cells in our brain. Initially our brains are very disorganised. Much of the process of growing up, being educated, and becoming mentally mature is the process of organising the vast chaos of the interconnectedness of the nerves in our brain into useful pathways.

Much of the process of learning and improving sporting reflexes and skills is the laying down, modification, and strengthening of nerve pathways in our body and brains. Some of these nerve pathways lie outside our brain in nerves of the body and spine. These need to be trained by physical training.

Many of the pathways, however, lie within the brain. These pathways can be effectively trained by the use of mental techniques such as imagery and simulation. These are explained below.

Imagery

Imagery is the process by which you can create, modify or strengthen pathways important to the co-ordination of your muscles, by training purely within your mind. Imagination is the driving force of imagery.

Imagery rests on the important principle that you can exercise these parts of your brain with inputs from your imagination rather than from your senses: the parts of the brain that you train with imagery experience imagined and real inputs similarly, with the real inputs being merely more vividly experienced.

So in its least effective form you can use imagery merely as a substitute for real practice to train the parts of your mind that it can reach. Even at this inferior level of use imagery is useful training where:

- An athlete is injured, and cannot train in any other way
- The correct equipment is not available, or practice is not possible for some other reason
- Where rapid practice is needed

However just to use imagery for the reasons above is to undervalue its effectiveness grossly.

Unleashing the Power of Imagery

The real power of imagery lies in a number of much more sophisticated points:

- Imagery allows you to practice and prepare for events and eventualities you can never expect to train for in reality. With practice it allows you to enter a situation you have never physically experienced with the feeling that you have been there before and achieved whatever you are trying to achieve.
- Similarly imagery allows you to prepare and practice your response to physical and psychological problems that do not occur normally, so that if they occur, you can respond to them competently and confidently. Imagery can be used to train in sports psychology skills such as stress and distraction management.
- It allows you to pre-experience the achievement of goals. This helps to give you confidence that these goals can be achieved, and so allows you to increase your abilities to levels you might not otherwise have reached.
- Practicing with imagery helps you to slow down complex skills so that you can isolate and feel the correct component movements of the skills, and isolate where problems in technique lie.

Imagery can also be used to affect some aspects of the 'involuntary' responses of your body such as releases of adrenaline. This is most highly developed in Eastern mystics, who use imagery in a highly effective way to significantly reduce e.g. heart beat rate or oxygen consumption.

Simulation

Simulation is similar to imagery in that it seeks to improve the quality of training by teaching your brain to cope with circumstances that would not be otherwise met until an important competition was reached.

Simulation, however, is carried out by making the your physical training circumstances as similar as possible to the 'real thing' - for example by bringing in crowds of spectators, by having performances judged, or by inviting press to a training session.

In many ways simulation is superior to imagery in training, as the stresses introduced are often more vivid because they exist in reality. However simulation requires much greater resources of time and effort to set up and implement, and necessarily is less flexible in terms of the range of eventualities that can be practiced for.

You should therefore use simulation and imagery together for maximum effect.

The following sections will explain Imagery and Simulation in more detail.

What to Use Imagery For

You can use imagery in a number of important ways:

- To feel and practice moves and routines perfectly within your mind. This helps to program and strengthen the nerve pathways within the brain that control the correct execution of the skill - remember that your mind is the control centre of your body in performance.
- To prepare for events that cannot be easily simulated for in practice. This gives you both the confidence to deal with these events as they arise, and the self-confidence that comes with preparation for any reasonable eventuality.
- To experience achievement of a goal in your mind before you physically achieve it. This helps you to build the confidence that that goal can be achieved and expand your perceptions of the boundaries of your abilities.
- To get a feeling of experience and 'having been there before' the first time you compete at a higher level.
- To practice and program your mind when you cannot practice and program mind and body together:
 - When you are physically tired, or do not want to tire yourself before a performance
 - When the correct equipment is not available
 - When weather is too bad to train
 - When injury stops normal training

- When you do not have the time to practice a particular skill physically
- To practice a particularly boring skill many times - concentrating your mind on imagery of the skill forces concentration on the skill.
- To study your technique in your mind, either reducing complex movements to simple skills, or slowing the movements down to analyze them for faults in technique.
- To relax - by imaging and enjoying a pleasant, quiet scene. This can be used most effectively in conjunction with biofeedback.

Imagery works best as a way of practicing and improving known skills, with known feelings and body positions. Whether or not it is an effective method or acquiring completely new skills is a matter of debate.

Using Imagery in Training

You can significantly improve the quality of your training sessions by effective use of imagery. By performing the skill being practiced in your mind before you execute it, you can focus on all the important parts of the skill. For example, if a golfer images a perfect golf swing before he actually carries one out, he is more likely to remember all the points that go into making a good swing, and maintain focus throughout it.

Imaging of an activity before its execution has the following advantages:

- It forces focus and concentration on execution of skills when otherwise you might just be tempted to go through the motions.
- It allows you to slow down and analyze fine skills or complex techniques to form as perfect a model of the technique as possible.
- It reminds you what to concentrate on to execute the skill perfectly.
- It allows you to compare how the physical movement compared with the perfect image. This helps you to detect faults in technique. Alternatively if the technique was better than the image, the image can be adjusted.

In addition imagery can be used in training to practice sports psychology skills.

For example, you might imagine appearing before a large hostile crowd, and experience the stress and anxiety symptoms that you might expect. Within your mind you can practice the stress management skills that will be explained later.

You might use imagery to practice pushing through pain barriers, or might practice keeping technique good when you imagine that your limbs feel exhausted.

Alternatively you might use imagery to rehearse and perfect strategies that will be used during a real performance.

Learning to Use Imagery

The following points will help with learning to use imagery effectively:

Imagery Should be as Vivid as Possible

A strong and potent image will be more effective and 'real' than a weak one when it is presented to the appropriate nerve pathways in your brain. Images can be made more real by:

- Using all your senses in an image. Touch, sound, smell, taste and body position (kinesthesia) should be combined with visual imagination to create highly 'real' images.
- Observing detail of sensations such as the feeling of the grip of a bat, the texture of clothes, the smell of sweat, the feeling and flow of a karate punch, the sound of a large crowd, or the size and shape of a stadium in which you will compete. These can be observed in detail in reality, and then incorporated into imagery later to make it more vivid.
- Imagining yourself within your body feeling and sensing all going on around you rather than looking on at yourself from a remote position. If you imagine yourself within yourself, then the image is more connected, realistic and involved than a remote view.

Start Gently and Use Imagery Systematically



As with most sports psychology techniques, it is often best to start gently so that the basic skills can be fully learned in a low stress environment. This means that you can be more confident of the effectiveness of these skills when you need to put them to the test.

Initially start using only 5 minutes of imagery a day, perhaps when you have just got into bed, or when you wake up in the morning. The number of minutes can be expanded as time goes on: typically many champions will do 15 minutes/day, although this may go as high as 1 hour/day just before a major competition.

Similarly, start using imagery in a quiet, relaxed environment in which there are few distractions. Slowly experiment with using it in increasingly disturbed situations until you are comfortable with using imagery in the most distracting environments such as high level events.

It is important too to use imagery systematically: get into the habit of practicing techniques in your mind before executing them in practice, and of using stress management imagery routinely. A habitual routine use of imagery will bring its benefits almost automatically when you are under stress.

Simulation

Simulation seeks to make your training environment as similar to the competition environment as possible.

While imagery relies on use of imagination, simulation relies on manipulation of the training environment by actually recreating the stresses under which you will perform.

Effectively, you can consider normal training only to train muscles and nerve pathways directly involved in the control of muscles. Imagery is a good way of training these nerve pathways in the brain, as well as those related to performance and sports psychology. It does not train muscles and body nerves nearly as effectively.

Simulation, however, seeks to train all parts of your brain and body by helping you to physically perform the skills being trained under a physical environment that recreates all the stresses and distractions of competition. This helps you to develop the mental skills that stop you 'choking under pressure' - stress management, distraction management, goal focus and imagery. It enables you to actually feel that you have been in a novel situation before.

Military training uses simulation in exactly the same way to teach soldiers to handle the intense psychological stresses of combat.

Aspects of Simulation

You can try introducing the following stresses into a training session to make a practice as realistic as possible:

- **Noise:** Loud noises can be played such as the sound of a large crowd at a football match
- **Spectators:** Spectators can be allowed in to view a training session. The more well-known you are, the more people will turn up to watch training.
- **Referees:** Referees and judges can be invited along to criticize and score your performance.
- **Bad Refereeing Decisions:** Bad or biased refereeing decisions can be made to train you to focus on performance, not outcome goals. This should be used relatively rarely.

- Cameras: Television cameras, flash photographers and press can be brought into the training session.
- Arena: If possible training should occur on the course or in the arena where competition will take place.
- Weather: Every opportunity should be taken to train in the worst weather conditions possible for competition.
- Fatigue: Push yourself to perform effectively when tired, so that you can learn how to keep concentration on good technique when your resources are low.
- Training when you have just eaten: This helps you to cope with the consequences of having to perform effectively unexpectedly.

If you simulate conditions that are much worse than the real conditions under which you will perform, then you will have the following advantages:

- Confidence that you can handle anything thrown at you
- Well practiced skills to handle the stresses and distractions of performance
- Confidence in your stamina and ability to keep technique good even under poor physical conditions such as tiredness, bad weather, poor equipment etc.

You can also use simulation, in the form of role-play to handle non-sporting stresses associated with performance, such as press interviews, etc.

While only top athletes may have the resources to use all aspects of simulation in their training sessions, you should be able to use some aspects effectively to help you prepare to give maximum performance under difficult physical and psychological conditions.

Improving Technique

Imagery and simulation can be used effectively in improving technique, particularly when used in conjunction with close study of the technique of high level performers in your sport.

By selecting athletes whose performance you admire in a particular exercise, and either watching or videoing them executing technique, you can build see how they execute every stage of a skill. Using a video recorder you can slow the action down so that the components of the skill can be isolated.

Once you have done this you can practice these components of the skill being observed, and can build them up into a complex action or a good image of the skill as it should be executed.

Alternatively you can video your execution of a skill, and compare your technique as it is with how it should be or how better performers carry it out.

Summary of Imagery and Simulation

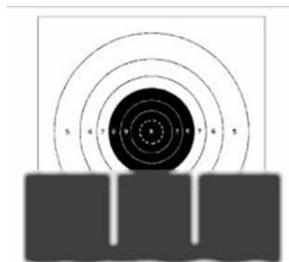
Your body is a sophisticated system powered by muscles and controlled by nerves, most of which are in the brain. The nerve pathways in your brain that are most important in sport are trained by presenting them either with real stimuli or, almost as effectively, with vividly imagined images.

Imagery is the process of using your imagination to create these vivid images which train the important mental pathways in your mind. At its most menial level, imagery can be used to practice this 'body control center' when no other method of practice is available. At a more sophisticated level you can use it to enhance your self-confidence, to prepare for eventualities that cannot be simulated in reality, to practice other sports psychology skills, to practice and improve technique, and to focus before a skill is executed.

Simulation is similar to imagery in that it is used to present nerve pathways in your brain with experiences that train them. In the case of simulation, however, the stimuli come through your senses, not from your imagination. Simulation works by making your training sessions as close to the final performance as possible by introducing spectators, judges, distractions and stress inducers so that you can learn to deal with them. Simulation trains not only the nerves in your brain, but also those in the rest of your body as you physically perform the skills being trained.

Imagery and simulation can be used together at the same time to create an intensely realistic pre-experience of an important competition or event. This gives you the feeling of having been there before, with the confidence and competence that comes with it.

Focus and Flow



Focus and Flow are at the heart of Sports Psychology:

- Focus is complete attention to the execution of a skill
- Flow is the state of being completely engrossed in the execution of a performance to the exclusion of everything else

When you are in a state of flow, focusing intensely on the execution of skills, you will give your best performances. You enter a state of almost Zen-like meditation in which mood, distraction and different stressors simply have no place in your consciousness. You are free to execute skills just as you have trained to execute them. This is an immensely satisfying state to achieve.

The qualities of flow are:

- All your attention is focused either
 - on the skills or routine being performed
 - or on the input from your senses relevant to the sport

- You are fully focused of the activities being performed, and are:
 - not aware of your own awareness, consciousness of self or ego
 - not evaluating the quality of execution of skills during performance
 - not concerned with distractions such as results, judges, audiences or other peoples expectations
 - not making any conscious decisions in your mind or reasoning with words - you are trusting your body to follow its training

- You are in complete control of actions and reactions

- You feel almost in an altered state of consciousness: achieving flow is exhilarating, and gives a powerful feeling of competence.

This section of Mind Tools will explain how to achieve flow and focus, and will explain how to deal with the main things that interfere with it. These are poor mood control, lack of ability to manage distraction and, most importantly, how to handle and use stress.

How Focus and Attention Work

This section briefly explains the necessary theory behind the way in which your brain works. This will put subsequent sections into context. There are two main things you need to understand:

- How parts of your brain work together, and
- How your brain has evolved to react to stimuli

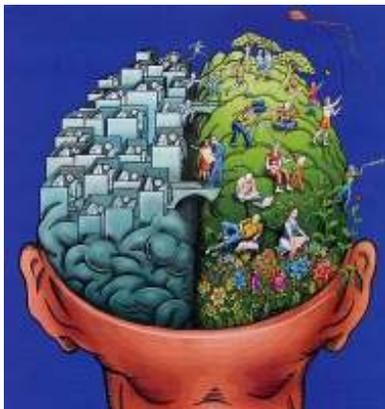
How Parts of Your Brain Work Together

Your brain is a hugely complex system made up of a vast number of components interacting in a hugely complex and sophisticated way. Much of its function is still not understood.

You will probably be aware of the theory that function of the brain is separated into left and right hemisphere functions. This theory grossly oversimplifies the complexity of brain function. It does, however, provide us with a useful model to apply to sports psychology that has a feeling of intuitive correctness.

The Left Brain/Right Brain Model

This model holds that different high level functions of your brain are localized into either the left side or the right side in the following way:



- Your *Left Brain* performs analytical activities that are processed logically, in sequence, such as:
 - Logic and rational thinking
 - Language and verbal self-instruction
 - Mathematics
 - Planning and Goal Setting
 - Analysis of a complex skill and construction of an image of how that skill should be performed
- Whereas your *Right Brain* controls complex activities where many factors are handled together, such as:
 - Imagery
 - Coordination, and execution of complex movements in space
 - Integration of complex skills into flowing movement
 - Intuition and creativity

The Left Brain (often called the *Analyzer*) tends to be dominant, as skills it is responsible for are most intensively trained during education. This part of the brain analyses and understands new skills, and examines existing technique or attitudes for errors and faults. This part of the brain is highly effective during training in improving technique.

The Right Brain (called the *Integrator*) controls the best performance of a skill by integrating all the components of the skill into one flowing movement in which all the isolated components of the skill work together.

This is important because either your analyzer or your integrator should be dominant in different circumstances:

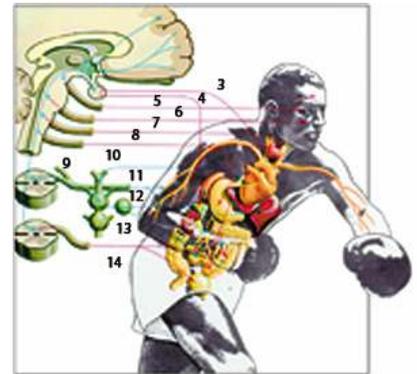
- During much of training the Analyzer should be dominant, picking up errors, faults in technique or harmful attitudes. It will then send corrections to the Integrator to amend the complex skill. Letting the 'Integrator' control practice can end up in empty training, in which nothing new is learned.
- During performance, however, the Integrator should be in control, so that all the skills learned are performed in a completely co-ordinated, flowing way. Similarly in a sport where complex movements of other competitors have to be taken into account, the Integrator is most effective in making tactical decisions. Letting the analyzer control performance by criticizing or analyzing execution of skills distracts the integrator.

Effectively, you have achieved 'flow' when your integrator is in complete control of a performance, and is not being distracted either by analysis from the left side of your brain, or by external factors.

How Your Brain Reacts to Stimuli

Your brain has evolved to protect you from danger. An important part of this is the response that draws your attention to unexpected or unusual stimuli. These might, for example, indicate that a predator is about to strike. Things that indicate danger might be:

- Intense stimuli such as loud noise and flashing light
- Movement
- Unusual stimuli - things not experienced before can be dangerous
- Absence of usual stimuli - lack of noise might indicate that other animals are aware of a predator



In a natural environment, this drawing of attention is very important for survival. However in a modern sporting environment these are distractions that break flow. Loud noises can come from cheering crowds. Flashes of light can come from flash photography. Movement can come from performers in unrelated events, etc.

Part of learning flow is learning to isolate the important stimuli for the sport from the irrelevant ones that cause distraction. This will involve learning to selectively override your brains natural reaction to stimuli.

Achieving Flow

Flow is easiest to achieve when:

- You perceive that your skills are good enough to match the perceived difficulty of the contest.
- The competition is not so easy that you become bored and do not concentrate.
- You have distraction under control
- You are paying full attention to the performance, with no analysis of errors or technique
- You are relaxed and alert
- You are thinking positively, and have eliminated all negative thoughts
- It is allowed to develop, and not forced
- You have practiced and trained attention



The Zen Approach

Perhaps the most systematic approach to achieving focus and flow so far is that used in oriental martial arts, such as Karate or Kendo. These adopt a Zen approach to concentration where the fighter is in a state of almost pure flow.

In these sports the competitor seeks to lose all distractions of ego, analysis and from surroundings, immersing him or herself completely within the activity.

The following things in particular are avoided:

- Wanting to win
- Show off
- Wanting to frighten or terrify the opponent
- The desire to be reactive and not take the initiative
- Trying so hard to achieve the correct state of mind that you distract yourself.

Effectively Western Sports psychology is now advocating an almost identical set of strategies through a skills based approach. If, however, you appreciate a mystical approach, you may appreciate the Zen approach to focus.



Improving Focus

Analyzing your Sport's Focus Requirements

Different sports, and different parts or positions in sports, require attention to be focused on different skills and different cues.

Where success relies on a physical skill being executed, and then focus on that skill.

In other cases, you may have to make a tactical appreciation before execution of the skill. The appropriate attention should be paid to this.

Alternatively where an opponent is involved, study and learn the cues that give away his or her intentions. For example, foot movements, glances in a particular direction or tensing of shoulder muscles can give away the fact that someone is about to throw a punch. Similarly the opponent may give cues as to defensive tactics to be used which may be picked up.

The focus requirements and cues to look for will differ from sport to sport and position to position. You can analyze them effectively by studying video footage of performance. This can be slowed down so that all cues can be examined. You can also pick up information on cues from books or videos on your sport.

By understanding the cues to look for, you can separate out the things to which attention should be directed from the clutter of irrelevant stimuli that occur in a competition environment.

Training to Improve Focus

You can improve focus by practice and training, much like any other skill.

You can practice it at its simplest almost as a form of meditation - firstly study an object for some time: get completely involved with it, in its shape, colour, texture, smell, etc. Then practice switching the focus to a different object, being completely involved in this, and nothing else.

Similarly you can practice focus on sounds, listening to them and then switching focus to other sounds.

This concentrated attention helps you to feel what sporting focus feels like. The rapid switching to another thing practices your ability to switch focus.

In normal training, visualise the performance of a skill using imagery, then focus on its execution as you actually perform it. Practice doing the skill without any analysis. Experience the feeling of flow. Associate this feeling of flow with a trigger word in your mind.

Keeping Focus as You Get Better

One thing to watch out for as you get better at a sport is loss of focus. This can happen for two main reasons:

- as your reactions become automatic they hold your attention less, and
- As you get better, you may find that you are not as challenged by other competitors.

You may find that these focus problems have their root in goal setting: if you are setting outcome goals such as 'coming first', then this will not be challenging if you win easily.

This can be prevented by setting performance goals that are sufficiently difficult to maintain motivation, a sense of being stretched and concentration on improving skills even when competition is weak.

Mood Control



Bad moods damage your motivation to succeed in training or competition. They make you more prone to negative thinking, and cause distraction, often as you trigger bad moods in other people. Bad moods emerge as bad temper, unhappiness, lethargy and sluggishness.

If you are in a good mood, then even dull training can be enjoyable.

Your mood is completely under your control - bad moods are an indulgence you cannot afford. You can improve your mood in the following ways:

- Through positive thinking and suggestion - say to yourself 'I feel good' or 'I am going to move faster' or 'I can feel energy pouring into my limbs'. This really does help.
- By treating each element of a performance individually - when you make a mistake, refocus and concentrate on the next separate element of the performance. Treating a performance in this way ensures that a bad move or a missed shot does not effect following moves or shots.
- By using imagery - imagine a beautiful scene or a time when you were performing very well and feeling good. Alternatively, imagine feeling good directly.
- By reviewing your goals to remotivate yourself.
- By smiling! - Forcing a smile onto your face for more than just a few seconds always seems to lift a bad mood. Try it - it really does work!

Distraction Management

Distraction is damaging to your performance because it interferes with your ability to focus and disrupts flow. It interferes with the attention that you need to apply to maintain good technique. This causes stress and consumes mental energy that is better applied elsewhere.



This section will teach you skills for overcoming distraction

Sources of Distraction

Distraction can come from a number of sources, both internal and external, such as:

- the presence of loved ones you want to impress
- family or relationship problems
- media - photographers, interviewers, cameras, heat form lights, etc.
- teammates and other competitors
- coaches who do not know when to keep quiet
- underperformance or unexpected high performance
- frustration at mistakes
- unjust criticism
- poor refereeing decisions
- changes in familiar patterns
- etc.

You can prepare for and deal with all of these sources of distraction.

Coping with distraction

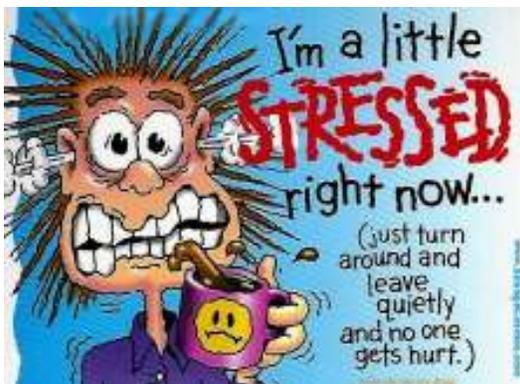
Coping with distractions and minor irritations is mainly a matter of attitude - you can either dwell on them and blow them up out of all proportion to their significance, or you can accept them and bypass them. If you waste mental energy fretting over a trivial problem, then this is energy that cannot be spent maintaining good technique (hence preserving physical energy). Over long events or competitions, this wastage of mental energy can seriously damage your performance.

What is worth remembering is that when you are distracted, lose concentration and make a mistake, you have not lost your skills. All you have lost is your focus.

The following points may help you to deal with distractions:

- Remember that although events may be beyond your control, your reactions to events are entirely controlled by you.
- Think positively - recognise petty irritations as such, and let them go
- Know you can perform well despite distraction
- Prepare for and expect more distraction at bigger events
- Expect other competitors to be more nervous at big events - use your ability to resist stress and distraction as a competitive advantage
- Develop a refocusing plan and practice using it when you are distracted
- Learn how to change bad moods to good moods
- Sleep and rest more before big events so that you have more mental energy to devote to distraction, mood and stress control.

Stress, Anxiety and Energy



Too much stress and anxiety can seriously affect your ability to focus on your skills and flow in a performance. This section examines the causes of excess stress and anxiety, explains their symptoms and then explains techniques that you can use to manage them.

It is important that you recognise that you are responsible for your own stress levels. Very often they are a product of the way

that you think. Learn to monitor your stress levels, and adjust them up if you need more arousal, or down if you are feeling too stressed. Also learn that other people may seek to manipulate your stress levels: if you are feeling stressed and uptight, the last thing you may need is a motivational talk from a coach or manager who may not be able to see your stress.

Stress

A certain level of stress is needed for optimum performance. If you are under too little stress, then you will find it difficult to motivate yourself to give a good performance. Too little stress expresses itself in feelings of boredom and not being stretched.

At an optimum level of stress you will get the benefits of alertness and activation that a good level of stress brings.

Excessive levels of stress damage performance and damage your enjoyment of your sport. These excessive levels occur in the following circumstances:

- When you think that what is being asked of you is beyond your perceived abilities
- When too much is asked of you in too short a space of time

- When unnecessary obstacles are put in the way of achieving goals

The negative effects of stress are:

- That it gets in the way of judgment and fine motor control
- It causes competition to be seen as a threat, not a challenge
- It damages the positive frame of mind you need for high quality competition by:
 - promoting negative thinking
 - damaging self-confidence
 - narrowing attention
 - and disrupting flow
- It consumes mental energy in, for example, worry. This is energy that you could devote to keeping technique good.

Very often stress can be caused by negative thinking as well as being a result of negative thinking: If you interpret a situation saying 'I'm in trouble', then you are much less likely to do well than if you think positively, seeing a new situation as an opportunity to exhibit your skills at a higher level.

Stress and Adrenaline

When you are in a competitive environment or are in an environment in which you are being evaluated, adrenaline may enter your bloodstream.

This has the following positive and negative effects on your body:

- Positive Effects:
 - Adrenaline causes physiological arousal
 - It causes alertness
 - It prepares the body for explosive activity
- Negative Effects:
 - It inhibits judgment
 - It interferes with fine motor control, and makes executing complex skills difficult.

You will experience the preparatory flow of adrenaline into your body typically as 'Butterflies in your stomach'.

In sports such as shooting where fine motor control is important, adrenaline may be a negative factor. However in sports like sprinting or power lifting, where explosive activity is required, adrenaline may be useful in generating optimum performance.

You may currently view high levels of adrenaline in your body negatively as stress. You may need to review this, perhaps welcoming adrenaline as an aid to your performance. Similarly you might like to consider using 'Psych Up' routines to raise your adrenaline levels if you are not sufficiently aroused.

Anxiety

Anxiety is different from stress. Anxiety comes from a concern over lack of control over circumstances. In some cases being anxious and worrying over a problem may generate a solution. Normally, however, it will just result in negative thinking.

Albert Ellis listed the five main unrealistic desires or beliefs that cause anxiety:

- The desire always to have the love and admiration of all people important to you. This is unrealistic because you have no control over other people's minds: people can have bad days, can see things in odd ways, can make mistakes, or can be plain disagreeable and awkward.
- The desire to always be thoroughly competent. This is unrealistic because you only achieve competence at a new level by making mistakes. Everybody has bad days and makes mistakes. One of the benefits of training with better athletes is that you can see them making mistakes and having bad days too.
- The belief that external factors cause all misfortune. Often negative events can be caused by your own negative attitudes. Similarly your own negative attitudes can cause you to view neutral events negatively. Another athlete might find something positive in something you view as a problem.
- The desire that events should always turn out the way that you want them to and people should always do what you want. Other people have their own agendas and do what they want to do.
- The belief that everything that has happened in the past will inevitably condition and control what has happened in the future. Very often things can be improved or changed if you try hard enough, or look at things in a different way.

Mental Energy



You need mental energy to be able to concentrate your attention and maintain good mental attitudes. If you are concentrating effectively then you can conserve physical energy by maintaining good technique when your muscles are tired, can maintain focus and good execution of skills, and can push and drive your body through pain and fatigue barriers.

You can waste mental energy on worry, stress, fretting over distractions, and

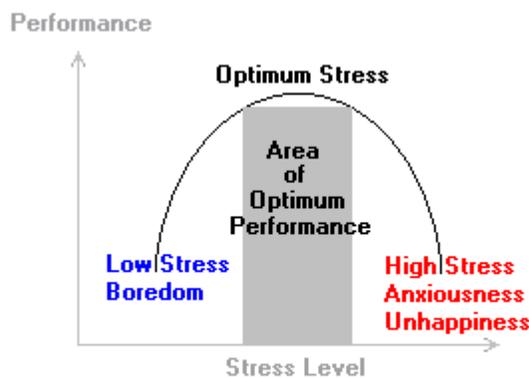
negative thinking. Over a long competition these not only damage enjoyment, but also drain energy so that performance suffers.

It is therefore important to avoid these by good use of sports psychology, and by resting effectively between events and by ensuring that you sleep properly.

Optimum Stress Levels

The level of stress under which you operate is important: if you are not under enough stress, then you may find that your performance suffers because you are bored and unmotivated. If you are under too much stress, then you will find that your results suffer as you find it difficult to focus on technique and fail to flow with the performance.

The graph below shows the relationship between stress and quality of performance:



The Relationship Between Stress and Performance

Where stress is low, you may find that your performance is low because you become bored, lack concentration and lack motivation. If this state persists for a long time, then you may find the sport tedious, and give it up.

Where stress is too high, your performance can suffer from all the symptoms of stress. Your flow can be disrupted, you can be distracted, and competition can become threatening and unpleasant.

In the middle, at a moderate level of stress, there is a zone of best performance. If you can keep yourself within this zone, then you will be sufficiently aroused to give a high quality performance, while not being over-stressed and unhappy.

This zone of optimum performance is in a different place and is a different shape for different people. Some people may operate most effectively at a level of

stress that would leave other people either bored or in pieces. It is possible that someone who functions superbly in a low level competition might experience difficulties in high level competition. Alternatively someone who performs only moderately at low level of competition might give exceptional performances under extreme pressure.

Not only will the zones of optimum performance be in different places for different athletes, they will also be different heights and different widths. This is why you must take responsibility for controlling your own levels of stress, particularly in a team situation: if the team generally needs motivation, but you are in an optimum zone, then paying attention to a motivating team talk may move you to a state of being over-stressed. Similarly if some team members need to be relaxed, then relaxation techniques applied to an entire team may move you to a state of bored demotivation.

You may also find that fine and complex skills are less tolerant to stress than simple skills - your zone of optimum performance may be narrower for very difficult skills than for the basic skills of the sport.

Finding Your Optimum Stress Level

An effective way of finding the stress level at which you operate best is to keep a training and performance log. In this record the quality of every training session or performance, along with the level of stress that you felt during that performance.

If you have stress monitoring equipment, and can score your performance, then this gives you hard, objective figures to use in your training log. If you do not have the ability to do this, then record your subjective views of the stress levels you felt and the quality of the session.

After a time review the training log - this should give you some good information on the way that you respond to stress. This information will help you to decide and implement a stress management program that is appropriate to the different sporting situations you find yourself in.

Symptoms of Stress

The following is a list of the major symptoms of stress that you might feel:

- **Physical Symptoms** - mainly in response to increased levels of adrenaline:
 - Increase in heart rate
 - Increase in Sweating, and a cooler skin as this combines with a reduction in the blood flow to your skin.

- 'Butterflies' in your stomach
 - Rapid Breathing
 - Tense Muscles
 - Dry Mouth
 - A desire to urinate
- **Mental Symptoms**
 - Worry
 - Confusion, inability to concentrate or difficulty making decisions
 - Feeling ill or odd
 - Feeling out of control or overwhelmed
- **Behavioral Symptoms**
 - Talking rapidly
 - Nervous mannerisms: nail biting, foot tapping, increased blinking, twitching, pacing
 - Scowling
 - Yawning

These symptoms of stress should not be taken in isolation - they could be caused by other factors. However if you find yourself exhibiting or recognising a number of them, then it would be worth investigating stress management techniques.

Increasing Stress Levels - Psyching Up

Where you are not feeling motivated towards an event, either because you are bored by it, because there is no serious competition or because you are tired, you may need to psych yourself up. This will raise your level of arousal so that you can perform effectively.

The following techniques can be used to psych up:

- Warm up faster and harder
- Use imagery - for example, a swimmer might imagine himself being chased by a shark!
- Use suggestion - 'I can feel energy flowing into me'
- Focus on the importance of the event
- or Focus on personal goals, such as running a race in a particular time, rather than unchallenging outcome goals such as winning (when competition is not intense).

Stress Reduction Techniques



This section shows you effective methods of reducing stress to a level where you can perform most effectively. The techniques that you select depend on the cause of the stress and the situation in which the stress occurs.

In choosing methods to combat stress, it is worth asking yourself where the stress comes from: if outside factors such as relationship difficulties are causing stress, then a positive thinking or imagery based technique may be effective. If the stress is based on the feeling of adrenaline in the body, then it may be effective purely to relax the body and slow the flow of adrenaline.

As with all sports psychology skills, the effectiveness of the stress reduction technique depends on practice.

Stress Reduction Techniques Explained

- **Environmental Methods**
 - Reduce the Importance of the Event
 - Reduce Uncertainties
 - Listen to Music or Relaxation Tapes

- **Physical Techniques:** these are most effective where stress is driven by excessive levels of adrenaline.
 - Progressive Muscular Relaxation
 - Breathing Control
 - Biofeedback

- **Mental Techniques:** most effective where psychological factors are driving stress.
 - Imagery Relaxation
 - Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking
 - Remembering past good workouts, performances and achievements
 - Self-Hypnosis and Auto-Suggestion

Building Self-Confidence



Develop the Self-Confidence You Deserve!

From the quietly confident doctor whose advice we rely on, to the star-quality confidence of an inspiring speaker, self-confident people have qualities that everyone admires.

Self-confidence is extremely important in almost every aspect of our lives, yet so many people struggle to find it. Sadly, this can be a vicious circle: People who lack self-confidence can find it difficult to become successful.

After all, most people are reluctant to back a project that's being pitched by someone who was nervous, fumbling and overly apologetic.

On the other hand, you might be persuaded by someone who spoke clearly, who held his or her head high, who answered questions assuredly, and who readily admitted when he/she did not know something.

Self-confident people inspire confidence in others: Their audience, their peers, their bosses, their customers, and their friends. Gaining the confidence of others is one of the key ways in which a self-confident person finds success.

The good news is that self-confidence really can be learned and built on. And, whether you're working on your own self-confidence or building the confidence of people around you, it's well-worth the effort! All other things being equal, self-confidence is often the single ingredient that distinguishes a successful person from someone less successful.

So how confident do you seem to others?

Your level of self-confidence can show in many ways: Your behavior, your body language, how you speak, what you say, and so on. Look at the following comparisons of common confident behavior with behavior associated with low self-confidence. Which thoughts or actions do you recognize in yourself and people around you?

Self-Confident	Low Self-Confidence
Doing what you believe to be right, even if others mock or criticize you for it.	Governing your behavior based on what other people think.
Being willing to take risks and go the extra mile to achieve better things.	Staying in your comfort zone, fearing failure and so avoid taking risks.

Admitting your mistakes and vowing to learn from them.	Working hard to cover up mistakes and praying that you can fix the problem before anyone is the wiser.
Waiting for others to congratulate you on your accomplishments.	Extolling your own virtues as often as possible to as many people as possible.
Accepting compliments graciously. "Thanks, I really worked hard on that prospectus. I'm pleased you recognize my efforts."	Dismissing compliments offhandedly. "Oh that prospectus was nothing really, anyone could have done it."

As you can see from these examples, low self-confidence can be self-destructive, and it often manifests itself as negativity. Self-confident people are generally more positive – they believe in themselves and their abilities, and they also believe in the wonders of living life to the full.

Tip: Balanced Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is about balance. At one extreme, we have people with low self-confidence. At the other end, we have people who may be over-confident.

If you are under-confident, you'll avoid taking risks and stretching yourself; and you might not try at all. And if you're over-confident, you may take on too much risk, stretch yourself beyond your capabilities, and crash badly. You may also find that you're so optimistic that you don't try hard enough to truly succeed.

Getting this right is a matter of having the right amount of confidence, founded in reality and on your true ability. With the right amount of self-confidence, you will take informed risks, stretch yourself (but not beyond your abilities) and try hard.

Building Self-Confidence

So how do you build this sense of balanced self-confidence, founded on a firm appreciation of reality?

The bad news is that there's no quick fix, or 5-minute solution.

The good news is that building self-confidence is readily achievable, just as long as you have the focus and determination to carry things through. And what's even better is that the things you'll do will build success – after all, your confidence will come from real, solid achievement. No-one can take this away from you!

So here are our three steps to self-confidence, for which we'll use the metaphor of a journey: Preparing for your journey; setting out; and accelerating towards success.

Step 1: Preparing for Your Journey

The first step involves getting yourself ready for your journey to self-confidence. You need to take stock of where you are, think about where you want to go, get yourself in the right mindset for your journey, and commit yourself to starting it and staying with it.

In preparing for your journey, do the following things:

Look at what you've already achieved:

Think about your life so far, and list the ten best things you've achieved in an "Achievement Log." Perhaps you came top in an important test or exam, played a key role in an important team, produced the best sales figures in a period, did something that made a key difference in someone else's life, or delivered a project that meant a lot for your business.

Put these into a smartly formatted document, which you can look at often. And then spend a few minutes each week enjoying the success you've already had!

Think about your strengths:

Next, use a technique like SWOT Analysis to take a look at who and where you are. Looking at your Achievement Log, and reflecting on your recent life, think about what your friends would consider to be your strengths and weaknesses. From these, think about the opportunities and threats you face.

Make sure that you enjoy a few minutes reflecting on your strengths!

Think about what's important to you, and where you want to go:

Next, think about the things that are really important to you, and what you want to achieve with your life.

Setting and achieving goals is a key part of this, and real self-confidence comes from this. Goal setting is the process you use to set yourself targets, and

measure your successful hitting of those targets. Inform your goal setting with your SWOT Analysis. Set goals that exploit your strengths, minimize your weaknesses, realize your opportunities, and control the threats you face.

And having set the major goals in your life, identify the first step in each.

A tip: Make sure it's a very small step, perhaps taking no more than an hour to complete!

Start managing your mind:

At this stage, you need to start managing your mind. Learn to pick up and defeat the negative self-talk which can destroy your confidence. And learn how to use imagery to create strong mental images of what you'll feel and experience as you achieve your major goals – there's something about doing this that makes even major goals seem achievable!

And then commit yourself to success!

The final part of preparing for the journey is to make a clear and unequivocal promise to yourself that you are absolutely committed to your journey, and that you will do all in your power to achieve it.

If as you're doing it, you find doubts starting to surface, write them down and challenge them calmly and rationally. If they dissolve under scrutiny, that's great. However if they are based on genuine risks, make sure you set additional goals to manage these appropriately.

Either way, make that promise!

Step 2: Setting Out

This is where you start, ever so slowly, moving towards your goal. By doing the right things, and starting with small, easy wins, you'll put yourself on the path to success – and build the self-confidence that comes with this.

Build the knowledge you need to succeed:

Looking at your goals, identify the skills you'll need to achieve them. And then look at how you can acquire these skills confidently and well. Don't just accept a sketchy, just-good-enough solution – look for a solution, a program or a course that fully equips you to achieve what you want to achieve, and ideally gives you a certificate you can be proud of.

Focus on the basics:

When you're starting, don't try to do anything clever or elaborate. And don't reach for perfection – just enjoy doing simple things successfully and well.

Set small goals, and achieve them:

Starting with the very small goals you identified in step 1, get in the habit of setting them, achieving them, and celebrating that achievement. Don't make goals particularly challenging at this stage, just get into the habit of achieving them and celebrating them. And little by little, start piling up the successes!

Keep managing your mind:

Stay on top of that positive thinking, keep celebrating and enjoying success, and keep those mental images strong.

And on the other side, learn to handle failure. Accept that mistakes happen when you're trying something new. In fact, if you get into the habit of treating mistakes as learning experiences, you can (almost) start to see them in a positive light. After all, there's a lot to be said for the saying "if it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger!"

Step 3: Accelerating Towards Success

By this stage, you'll feel your self-confidence building. You'll have completed some of the courses you started in step 2, and you'll have plenty of success to celebrate!

Now's the time to start stretching yourself. Make the goals a bit bigger, and the challenges a bit tougher. Increase the size of your commitment. And extend the skills you've proven into new, but closely related arenas.

Tip 1:

Keep yourself grounded – this is where people tend to get over-confident and over-stretch themselves. And make sure you don't start enjoying cleverness for its own sake...

As long as you keep on stretching yourself enough, but not too much, you'll find your self-confidence building apace. What's more, you'll have earned your self-confidence – because you'll have put in the hard graft necessary to be successful!

Sporting Excellence

The following pointers should lead you to maximize your sporting abilities:

- **Training Excellence**
 - Set specific achievement goals before each training session
 - Prepare your mind before training to get the most out of each period
 - In training practice your skills with the maximum attention and effort
 - Use imagery and simulation to mimic actual performance as far as possible
 - Practice distraction, mood and stress control so that they can be applied effectively in competition
- **Performance Excellence**
 - Rest effectively before a performance: over-training exhausts your body and tires your mind when you need your maximum mental resources
 - Use pre-performance rituals and on-site psych plans so that you start competing in the best frame of mind
 - Keep focus. If you lose focus, apply a refocusing plan to regain concentration
 - Learn as much as possible out of your performance, but only analyze after your performance is complete
- **Keep a training/performance diary** to set goals and record performance and mental results.

Bringing it all together: The Training and Performance Diary



You can help yourself to routinely apply sports psychology techniques by getting into the habit of using a Training and Performance diary before and after every training session and performance.

The Training and Performance diary is an extremely effective tool that brings together and helps to apply almost everything that this Mind Tools Sports Psychology section has covered.

Take a diary that has a full page for every day. Block each page into sections for:

- Entries before the session:
 - Goals - enter the main goals to be achieved in the training session or performance here. Enter goals before the session or performance. Base the setting of goals on notes from previous pages of the diary.
- Entries after the session:

- Achievements - Write down the goals achieved here after the session.
- Errors - note mistakes here, and suggestions for future improvements or possible future goals
- Quality of Session - Write down your assessment of the quality of the session. Include here any times or scores you achieved.
- Mindset - make entries here recording your mood, susceptibility to distraction, feeling of stress, and feeling of focus/flow. Score these from 1(poor) to 10 (v. good). Note why you think you felt the way you did.

Keeping this diary has the following advantages:

- It focuses your attention before a session on what you need to achieve. This helps to ensure that training sessions and performances are always useful for improvement of skills.
- It helps you to track the achievement of goals, and feed information back into the setting of new goals. This helps to build your confidence as you can see easily what you have achieved.
- It helps you to isolate areas needing improvement and plan to work on them.
- It gives you the raw data you need to track improvement over time so that you can see how you are improving.
- It helps you to see and analyze how mood, distraction, and stress relate to performance and flow. This will help you to develop management programs for these, and apply them appropriately.

Your Pre-Competition Routine

Part of mental preparation for competition is ensuring that you start your performance in a state of flow. Many high level athletes do this by developing routines that help them to focus their minds and block out distractions. These may involve complex and detailed rituals that involve preparation, detailed dressing rules, or precisely executed warm-ups. Part of this practiced routine might involve specific sports psychology skills such as imagery, positive thinking, mood control and distraction and stress management, perhaps using a Training & Performance Diary.

All of this ensures that you enter a competitive situation in the ideal state of mind to give an excellent performance.

Experiment with developing a ritual that covers all points of preparation that you consider to be important. By practicing this ritual and keeping it standard in training, it will be automatic and complete when you face a potentially stressful competition.

Performing at Your Best in Competition

You can perform best in competition if you remember the following pointer:



- Enjoy the performance - if you find it dull, then you may need to psych yourself up or focus on performance rather than outcome goals. If you are so stressed that you do not enjoy the performance, implement stress management techniques.
- Execute, analyze and improve skills in practice. In competition perform thought-free - trust all that hard training. Only analyze your performance after the event.
- If you make a mistake during performance, forget about it and focus on executing the next skill properly. Dwelling on past mistakes will distract you from good performance of present skills.
- Use Pre-Competition Rituals, On- Site Psych Plans and Refocusing Plans to block distractions, prepare for all eventualities, and keep your performance flowing.

The On-Site Psych Plan

The On-Site Psych Plan works in conjunction with pre-competition routines to prepare fully for competition.

The idea of the On-Site Psych Plan is to prepare you for any reasonable eventuality, so that you can deal with the inevitable distractions that will occur as rapidly and effectively as possible. This helps to ensure that you are in a positive and focused frame of mind for the start of your event.

To prepare the plan, list all the physical and mental steps that occur between arriving on site and the start of the performance. List every distraction that might reasonably occur during this time. Next to the listed items, list what to do if these occur or go wrong and why you will do it. Next to that list what you will do if that goes wrong.

This will ensure that you have thought about and prepared for every reasonable eventuality that might occur up to the start of the performance. This will significantly reduce any anxiety you may feel, as not only do you know how you will deal with any problems that come along, you will know how to react if your first solutions do not work.

You can practice your on-site psych plan using imagery and simulation.

Your Refocusing Plan

A refocusing plan is very similar to an on-site psych plan, in that it aims to prepare to return you to a state of focus and flow during a performance where something goes wrong. This might be because you are distracted, become stressed, make a mistake or suffer an unjust refereeing decision.

Since you will need to apply the refocusing plan rapidly, it needs to be short and simple.

An effective way of preparing the plan is to list what might go wrong with the performance, and then write down how you will let go of the distraction and refocus on your performance. This might be by rapid application of a relaxation technique, by using a cue-word that has been linked to a feeling of focus, or by effective use of imagery.

Practice applying the effective refocusing technique using imagery or simulation. This will make it easier to use and apply the technique during competition.

