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MENTAL PREPARATION: Using Mental Imagery for Success

"I try to visualize my race before I swim. Like I'll lie down and I'll relax - totally relax - and just think how I'm going to swim my race, how I'm going to, you know, get into the turns and out of the turns, how my stroke is going to be. I go through my entire race..."

"In warm-up, I swim in the lane that I'm going to be racing in and that kind of helps me. You know, I look up in the stands and picture what it is going to be like with people in it. I get a good feel for my surroundings and imagine what it is going to be like during the race. And think about the people that are going to be in that heat with me and what lanes they're going to be in..."

Mental imagery is a skill athletes can tap into to help reach their goals. Look at the quotes listed at the side - they illustrate how mental imagery can be used to achieve goals through mental preparation for success.

Imagery can also be used to help adjust pre-competitive and competitive mood and energy levels (for example, if you are too nervous, you can help yourself relax by mentally taking yourself to a quiet, calm environment).

Finally, imagery can be effective when learning a skill through mental practice – an athlete can work on turns without getting in the water! Read on to learn more about what a powerful tool imagery can be.

Mental Imagery

Most athletes already use mental imagery naturally, though often not in a systematic or purposeful manner. Similar to physical skills, mental skills such as imagery need to be practiced and used in a variety of settings so that one can call on them when the pressure is on.

How Can Imagery Improve Performance?

In addition to the ways athletes in the quotes described their uses for imagery, there are a number of other uses for this versatile skill.

To see success: Athletes can see and feel themselves achieving goals. This helps build confidence that these goals can be achieved. This supports the adage "Seeing is Believing".

To motivate: Sometimes in the middle of a long period of training, it can become difficult to maintain the proper intensity level needed to get the most out of practice. Base training in the pool can be mentally challenging, to say the least. Thoughts and images of past and future competitions can be helpful in maintaining persistence and intensity level while training.

To manage energy level: Imagery can be used to change energy level, using calming images to relax, or energizing images to "psych" up.

To learn/perfect skills: Imagery can be used as an additional form of practice to help master a particular skill. Or, imagery can be used to correct errors in swim technique--either by reducing complex movements to simple skills or slowing the movements down to better analyze them for technique errors.



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To refocus: During practice and competition, many distractions can arise that prevent an athlete from maintaining an optimal focus. Imagining what to focus on can often help get an athlete back on track, by helping remind her about what is important.

To prepare for competition: Just as a swimmer needs to prepare physically for competition by stretching and warming up, he needs to get mentally ready. He can imagine himself in the physical competition environment and mentally rehearse key elements of his performance. He can also prepare for the unexpected by imagining himself in difficult situations and then see himself successfully dealing with them. Finally, he can also see himself succeeding, touching the wall with a best time.

To evaluate performance: After a swim, imagery can be used to evaluate performance. An athlete can replay her swim in her head, to reinforce what she did well and evaluate those aspects that need to be improved.

Mental Imagery: To help recover from an injury. Injuries are no fun. However, there are mental skills athletes can use to help in the recovery process- imagery being one such skill. A swimmer can use imagery to visualize herself healing from her specific injury; and to visualize performing specific skills in their sport to stay "fresh".

Tips to Best Learn and Use Imagery:

Be calm and relaxed: Imagery is most often effective when the mind is calm and the body is relaxed. If your body feels tense, take a few minutes to relax and get yourself focused.

Use all the senses: Often, athletes only use their visual sense when imaging- seeing themselves perform. But equally important is feel, sound, thoughts, body position, and even smell and taste, as these are all part of the athletic experience.

Control the Mental Images: In addition to vividness, being able to control images - making sure you see and feel yourself perform as you want to perform - is another vital piece of successful imagery.

At first, keep imagery practice simple: It is generally best to first learn and practice imagery in a quiet environment with few distractions. Start by imaging basic objects or places such as your bedroom or a lemon. Try to manipulate the image - move the furniture in your room or peel the lemon. The key is to first learn how to create and recreate mental images. Later, this skill can be applied to swimming.

Use movement: Make images more vivid by including some movement with the imagery - this can help create a body experience to match what is being imagined - which can strengthen the image itself. Given the physical nature of swimming including movements can be very helpful in increasing imagery effectiveness and self-awareness.

Mental Imagery: Practice, practice, practice! Remember that, just like physical skills, mental imagery can only be improved through practice. Spend time every week working on imagery skills.