VISUALIZATION

A Form of Active Mental Rehearsal

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Introduction to Visualization

All athletes' "bread and butter" involves physically practicing and rehearsing certain skills – technical movements, patterns of play, and situations that can cause fatigue. In these ways, physical rehearsal prepares your body for battle and gives your mind confidence in your preparations.
Visualization is equally common. In fact, people mentally prepare so regularly that we're not always aware that we're doing it. We plan out our day; we create to-do lists; we prepare for a difficult conversation; we imagine what a new pair of shoes will look like and so on.
In the sporting context, visualization is also something that happens very regularly. In the case of sports visualization, however, it can take place deliberately or, as is often the case, athletes' fears, self-doubts, and inner voice take over and cause athletes to mentally practice negative situations, without actually wanting to or being in control of it. This negative visualization can be taking place regularly without athletes even being particularly aware of it. You find yourself imagining things going badly; or you spend time worrying about situations that will cause a recurring injury; or you feel yourself placing your opposition on some pedestal of perfection like they're somehow flawless and amazing compared to you … these negative visualizations are powerful at telling your mind what you expect to happen. These patterns of negativity are rehearsed and, over time, become your character or disposition as an athlete. The sport itself can lose its joyful experience. The way you even speak and think to yourself becomes negative and unhelpful.
But, as with all forms of rehearsal and practice, good rehearsal prepares for good performance; and bad rehearsal practices bad performance.

"The ability to become aware of your mental practice, eliminate negative rehearsal, and instead harness and control the positive power of good mental rehearsal, is when visualization becomes a significant component of good preparation, stronger performance, and greater mental toughness."

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Definition of Visualization

Visualization is the use of mental rehearsal – imagining a situation in a sport taking place in real-time – that involves your physical behavior, your feelings or emotions, and even the sounds created by your actions and in your surroundings. It takes place WITH or WITHOUT your active control and manipulation and so

either it masters you, or you master it

Controlled Visualization acts like mental coaching. You decide how you want to act and feel in any number of sporting situations, and then you "mentally experience" yourself doing it perfectly – including the physical action, the ideal feeling (such as confidence, calm, or being really aggressive), the sounds (such as your footwork, your contact with the ball, your breathing, your opposition, and even the crowd), and your reaction (such as your ideal response to a huge moment won, or a mistake made, or an opponent doing something really well). You SEE it all in your mind's eye, over and over again. This pattern of ideal performance is rehearsed and, over time, it becomes your character or disposition. Sport itself regains its joyful experience of increased mastery.

Process of Becoming Expert at Visualizing

Repeated visualization is an important component of your overall active rehearsal, not to be done instead of physical practice, but used along with it. In fact, given the flexibility of our imagination, visualizing something is often an important first step to be used BEFORE you try something with your body. It "shows" your body a movement before you physically try.

Schedule your Mental Practice

1. Visualizing as a form of learning is best done at a time PRIOR TO when there is pressure to perform. So, mentally rehearsing something quite new should take place in the weeks leading up to a competition rather than competition week
   a. Rehearse new concepts in the present, executing then flawlessly
   b. Mentally practice feeling confident and in the right "zone" to be your best
2. Your mental workout, like your other workouts, should be scheduled, clear about what body-part/movement/pattern you're practicing that day through visualization. And you should follow your schedule

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As you read ahead, you will find details about other uses of visualization for rehearsing your body language, your self-talk, and even your ideal "zone"

In the days leading up to competition

In the days leading up to competition – when there is a bit more nerves or tension or excitement:
1. Take "walking rehearsals" to relax, picture confidence and ease, & reinforce
2. Use focused breathing as a form of meditation to quiet your mind and stay present. So, before you start rehearsing, close your eyes and take 5 slow long breaths, listening to your inhales and exhales, and emptying your mind of any thoughts. Repeat this if need be until you empty your mind
3. Now, your mental rehearsal should be about seeing yourself positively, calm, in control, even joyful
4. Run through your routines, your patterns, and your reactions, as needed

Visualizing Your Patterns of Self-Talk and Body Language

Much like visualization, a lot of the ways you think and speak to yourself in competition can happen without you really being aware or in control of what happens. Same goes for body language – your body can look a certain way in tense or stressful situations without you really being aware or in control of it. These "patterns" either control you, or you control them. For a deeper dive into what patterns of self-talk and body language are, see https://www.petersenfuturesolutions.com/teams
NOTE: see other pieces on "Building an Athlete Profile, and, "Team Identity & Values" for additional lessons on building your COMMITMENT to change – this is also crucial.

How do you Develop your Patterns?

How do you develop your patterns? One way that definitely helps is visualization.
The key here is to spend time imagining specific in-game situations that are predictable and that can cause an undesired response – losing an important point in tennis; making a big tactical error; making your pass obvious and getting picked off; playing below par in general.
1. Picture how you would normally feel in these or other situations
2. Make a plan for how you wish to react to key situations – with your thoughts, your body language, your words
3. Mentally rehearse each one separately.
4. Build a mental workout plan that consistently trains the desired pattern
5. COMMIT to it !

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Visualizing Your Pitch - Your ZONE!

As with the Zone of Optimal Performance (Zoning), visualization can be used prior to competition to rehearse your ideal "pitch". Athletes have a "pitch range" that suits their most enjoyable performance – for some it is about being intense and pumped up, for others it is about being level with their emotions while being fully tuned in to the competitive moment. So, ask yourself, were you:
- a. Pumped up, loudly encouraging yourself, bouncing around, fighting like crazy, maybe even feeling a bit angry at your opponent? OR, were you:
- b. Loose, in control, unphased, responding to situations with easy solutions, pretty quiet verbally or in your thoughts?

These states point toward the pitch that may fit your Zone.

Use Visualization to:

- a. Picture IN THE PRESENT TENSE, welcoming one another's great performance
- b. See them testing your abilities and see yourself welcoming it
- c. See yourself adapting and responding by using skills you have added to your game, including triggers and routines
- d. See yourself smiling after misses or mistakes, instantly putting mistakes behind you and being light on your feet moving eagerly forward to the next moment
- e. See yourself being at the right "pitch" for your satisfying performance

- f. To activate yourself UP, rehearse using quick, explosive, bouncing and stepping, and using phrases like "here we go / everything I got"
- g . To deactivate yourself DOWN, rehearse using controlled breathing that allows you to feel your body and thoughts go quiet and calm. 3-count inhale, 3-count exhale, from 3-10 times. Use reassuring phrases like "This is what I trained for / I've got this under control / my body knows what to do"

How do I assess my progress with Visualization?

Following Competition

Make sure you're somewhere quiet that allows you the time and space to reflect on your progress. Ideally, take out your journal and reflect upon your week leading up to, as well as the actual performance itself.
Remember, like any sporting technical skill or improving your level or strength and fitness, VISUALIZATION WORKS OUT THAT CRUCIAL MUSCLE – YOUR BRAIN – so it takes time, practice, and reflection to build improvements.

Ask yourself:

1. What was the quality and, importantly, CONSISTENCY, of your visualization sessions?
2. With a score out of 10, how much did you BELIEVE in what you were "seeing" in those sessions?

Then you just repeat the cycle, repeated with joy, excitement, and commitment.

GOOD LUCK ! if you need assistance, please email me at info@petersenfuturesolutions.com or book an appointment on Zoom at https://www.petersenfuturesolutions.com/teams

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