ATHLETIC FOCUS

PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY
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Introduction

Focus sounds like such an obvious state to be in during competition. You hear it on the sidelines constantly from coaches and parents – "FOCUS!" (which I'm pretty sure is NOT helpful to players...). In reality, athletes use different tools to eliminate noise and distraction, even to clear the mind of all conscious thought, in order to feel prepared for the next moment. Athletic focus, therefore, is often about quieting the mind, bringing thoughts into the present if thinking is even required, and giving your mind a simple task. The task, like listening to your breathing, might not be about a strategy or action. It might simply be about CLEARING the mind first so as to ALLOW ATTENTION TO BE DIRECTED toward the task at hand.

Failure to "de-clutter" your thoughts and to therefore develop appropriate refocus techniques is a major weakness in top level sport. The key to avoiding this weakness is to be in the present – not thinking ahead to "what if's" and definitely not lingering on past mistakes. Negativity in any form is a way of rehearsing or remembering failure and has to be refocused on constructive and positive attention to detail.

Focus on negative = practice competing negatively
Focus on constructive or positive = practice competing as your best self

Definition of Athletic Focus

Focus is the ability to concentrate on the task at hand. Importantly, athletic focus means concentrating only on the relevant and appropriate cues, that is, the small number of most relevant stimuli needed to perform optimally in any particular competitive scenario. This means that athletic focus involves -

staying in the present,
only concentrating on the most relevant stimuli, and
actively blanking out all other distracting stimuli.

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Process of Gaining Focus or Getting Re-Focused

How often have you found yourself distracted by paying attention to an opponent who is getting under your skin? Or maybe it's the distracting sideline that is taking your attention away from the task at hand, or even internal thoughts and feelings of fatigue, fear, or discomfort? NONE of these things are helpful to your best focus and best performance.

Getting Focused

1. Quiet the mind - listening to several long and slow intentional breaths, is simply about CLEARING your mind first
2. Bring thoughts into the present if thinking is required
3. Focus your concentration on doing the thing you need to do EASILY and IN THE PRESENT

Getting Re-Focused

1. **Trigger Words** – as you catch yourself wandering into a useless and unproductive space in the future or past, your ***"trigger word"*** brings you back to your preferred focus point. TRIGGERS are deliberate and pre-rehearsed reactions used by athletes to immediately begin a corrective routine – some positive or constructive form of body language or self-talk – in order to use a potentially negative course of action as a moment to reinforce a positive action.

Finding Your ZONE

These trigger words can also be used to get you your right **ZONE** or sometimes called **PITCH** – if you need to GET UP, or if you need to CALM DOWN a bit. It is important that your ZONE is *NOT* trying to reach some far-off perfection. Instead, it is:

- the ability to experience joy and pride in the moment as progress is made towards the top
- understanding there can always be more progress toward to the top, but remaining fully engaged in the joy of the challenge and growth of the moment
- appreciating that your opponent, or opposing team, is a crucial partner is you getting into your zone
- actively welcoming the opposition's challenge because you believe in yourself

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Team Focus and Re-Focus Tools

Also as a team, you can use tools to stay unified, connected, and playing for one another. Examples include your **HUDDLE** and **breathing** exercise, often accompanied by **1-2 speakers** giving few but important words to unify and connect the team:

1. Here, you get in your huddle and, following the example of one of your captains, together you take 2-3 slow breaths, eyes open, looking at a team-mate. This not only clears your mind and brings you back to the present, but it reconnects the team in a “private space”. The example can be used to set up the right focus, OR, to return to the appropriate focus and clarity
2. Key phrases, often identified when the team lists out your values, can be used in the huddle to bring the team to the Zone/Pitch you want to feel. “Win the next moment”, “Team First” and so on are examples of key phrases. Again, the example can be used to set up the right focus, OR, to return to the appropriate focus and clarity

Using Your Pre-Game Week to Rehearse With Visualization

For rehearsing focus, use **Visualization** to:

1. Picture IN THE PRESENT TENSE, welcoming the cauldron of competition
2. See opponents, the crowd, the ref, other coaches, testing your abilities to stay focused on the moment you’re in, testing your ability to block out distraction
3. See yourself adapting and responding by using skills you have added to your game, including triggers, to keep an uncluttered mind
4. Many athletes use mental tricks to give your focus something simple to “glom on to “, such as watching the rotation of the ball, or counting your footsteps, just to give your mind ONE THING to focus on in the face of multiple distractions
5. See yourself smiling after misses or mistakes, instantly putting mistakes behind you and bouncing eagerly forward to the next moment. This is crucial so as not to dwell on the past – dwelling is rehearsing for failure

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How do I assess my progress with Athletic Focus ?

The Week of Competition

1. Did you use visualization to mentally rehearse your focus?

Following Competition

Take out your journal and reflect upon your performance

1. Did you use breathing and single stimulus tools to quiet and empty your mind?
2. Did you find you were regularly focusing on the negative – mistakes, fear, opponent's dominance, OR, were you automatically focused on constructive and positive?
3. When you did find yourself focused on the negative, did you "trigger" your re-focus?
4. Were you staying in the present, OR, were you dwelling on mistakes or worrying about future events such as losing?
5. Were you paying attention to and getting distracted by unhelpful stimuli – the ref's bad call, the chirping opponent, the crowd, negative self-talk? Again, were you able to "trigger" your way back to constructive and positive?

For team sports –

1. Did the team use your huddle, take 2-3 slow breaths, eyes open, looking at a team-mate?
2. Did important team leaders use key phrases in the huddle to bring the team to the Zone/Pitch you want to feel?

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

GOOD LUCK !

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