Mental Skills Training:

High-Performance for Mind & Body

Ron Jones, MS

ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor
Licensed Corporate Wellcoach
Licensed USA Cycling Coach

Mental Skills Training:

High-Performance for Mind & Body

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

**These are the primary sport psychology interventions found in the research literature recommended for Mental Skills Training programs.*

Mental Skills Training:

High-Performance for Mind & Body

The mind controls the body…if you're not training the mind—then you're not really training!

Ron Jones has presented health and fitness-related topics at state and national events including the U.S. Olympic Training Center where he presented *Mental Skills Training* for the USA Track & Field Elite Development Camp.

Ron has a MS in Kinesiology/Sport Psychology from CSU, Northridge and a BA in Physical Education/English. He is a certified Health/Fitness Instructor with American College of Sports Medicine, Licensed Corporate Wellcoach, Licensed USA Cycling Coach, and a professionally credentialed teacher in Physical Education, Health Science, and English.

As an athlete, Jones has numerous honors in endurance sports of Biathlon, cycling, and distance running. He was all conference in collegiate cross country, a two-time Biathlon All-American, and two-time Race Across America (RAAM) Team Cycling Champion which included a new transcontinental RAAM record in 1996. Ron has coached 1st Grade through Collegiate X-Country and Track plus numerous adult endurance athletes in triathlon, cycling, and running.

Through education and experience, Ron has learned the essentials of Mental Skills Training that can benefit all athletes regardless of age or ability. You can now learn in a workbook format what athletes from the Olympic level to youth sports are using successfully to enhance performance and enjoyment!

Introduction to Mental Skills Training

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

"It is imperative to master the principles of the art of war and learn to be unmoved in mind even in the heat of the battle."
Miyamoto Musashi, Samurai Warrior (1643)

Mental Skills Training (MST) is widely associated with current advancements in the science of today's sporting activities; however, integration of mind and body to enhance human performance is nothing new as "man's interest in the mental aspects of the physical performance can be traced back 3,000 years to Homer's preaching on a faultless body and a blameless mind" (Diamant). Specific scientific interest in the mental aspects of physical performance in the United States started as early as the mid-1890's and the first actual sport psychology laboratory was established in 1925. Today sports comprise a significant role in American culture, and sport psychology is of great interest for enhancing athletic performance (Smith & Smoll, 2002c).

Throughout the sport psychology literature, certain primary interventions are recommended in support of the multi-modal approach to mental skills training. Research suggests that five key sport psychology interventions be included in any MST program. These five interventions are ***arousal and anxiety regulation, relaxation, goal setting, mental imagery, and attentional focus.***

The five interventions mentioned above are well documented in the literature as significant methods of enhancing performance in virtually all sport situations, regardless of age or skill level. Proper arousal levels are shown by research to optimize performance by controlling anxiety responses and keeping athletes in a zone or flow state of optimal functioning. Relaxation has been shown to be an effective technique to help athletes learn to regulate arousal and anxiety levels, and to optimize flow states. The process of goal setting is a well documented procedure designed to facilitate performance along a progression from basic skill acquisition to final season outcome. Mental imagery is highly effective for enhancing optimal performance when a multi-modal approach is implemented using multiple sensory inputs. Lastly, attentional focus training techniques keep extraneous input and distractions from interfering with performance while allowing athletes sufficient awareness of relevant cues that are important to enhanced levels of performance.

Sport psychology researchers and practioners have used these five interventions or variations to create training manuals, workshops, and books for students, athletes, coaches, and parents. However, despite the abundant knowledge and resources on sport psychology, there are still major problems with the implementation of these well-founded recommendations and locating introductory materials for those experiencing the world of sport psychology for the first time. This Mental Skills Training workbook seeks to fill a void in the current literature

and provide a brief introduction with sample exercises for immediate use with athletes young and old, coaches, personal trainers, and parents in a simple and user-friendly workbook format.

Limitations of Mental Skills Training

The inclusion of mental imagery and mental skills training for sports has been validated by the research. Smith and Smoll (2002c) noted that, "while physical practice is proven as the most effective single method of learning and improving an athletic skill, a combination of physical and mental practice is often more effective than physical practice alone" (p. 82). However, as highlighted by the *U.S. Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Training Manual*, "sport psychology cannot replace physical and technical training" (p. 1). As with any successful physical training program, mental imagery and skills must also be practiced with an attention to quality and consistency. Mental imagery and skills are not magic; success can only be realized through a positive dedication and belief in the abilities to enhance performance through regular quality practice. It is common knowledge in the literature that mental skills will fail unless they are taught and practiced correctly just like any physical sport skills.

Secondly, mental imagery and Mental Skills Training are not designed to correct major abnormal behavioral problems already present in the personal life of an athlete. *Mental skills are specifically for assisting the normal athlete to positively handle the additional stresses found with increasing levels of athletic competition in approaching supernormal behavior.*

There has been validation for sport psychology interventions taught by people other than licensed sport psychologists. Smith and Smoll (2002c) noted, "you do not have to be a sport psychologist to use imagery techniques with your young athletes" and that coaches properly trained in mental skills can safely teach youth athletes (p. 84). A critical point was cited by Smith and Smoll in that, "coaches increasingly recognize the importance of psychological as well as physical skills. Despite this recognition, however, coaches have been given little information on how to teach psychological skills" (p. 75). The authors went on to summarize that even parents could be taught mental training skills for youth sports through workshops and other materials.

Youth sports are given particular attention in the early sections, and special youth coaching tips appear throughout the workbook in an effort to increase the enjoyment of the sport experience for young athletes and out of concern for the high youth-sport dropout rates. It is imperative that adults foster a culture of enjoyable physical activity with young Americans so that they will continue to remain active and fit throughout their lives in opposition to our increasing obesity and physical inactivity problems. Creating a positive environment with Mental Skills Training can not only improve performance—but also add joy to the sport of exercise activity which can lead to a fitness lifestyle of continued activity for years to come. ***Please note that adult athletes can benefit greatly from a***

brief study of youth sports philosophy and coaching psychology even if they are not parents or not involved with youth sport programs.

The final sections highlight personal tips for getting started and major resources for those that desire more reading and research into sport psychology, Mental Skills Training, and youth sport coaching psychology. A full citation of the original references is also listed for scholarly research purposes along with author contact information.

This workbook is designed primarily for educating adult coaches, adult athletes, parents of youth athletes, and even personal trainers on "sport" psychology interventions. High school athletes can also benefit from reading this workbook. ***However, sport psychology is really "performance" psychology. Sport psychology and Mental Skills Training can be applied not only to sport and exercise, but also to business, school, or any other competitive setting.***

In Mind, Body, & Spirit,

"A sound mind in a sound body, is a short but full description of a happy state in this world."
--John Locke

Youth Sports: History & Overview

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

"The only successful youth sports program is the one with the coach who will accept the losing along with the winning…and still be able to congratulate his team for their efforts."
--Roger Staubach, NFL Hall of Fame Quarterback

History: Early youth sport programs began in the early 1900s and were originally school-based and focused on *educational* physical activity. As the programs developed and organized, they became governed by national agencies instead of local schools. Today as many as 47 million children participate in U.S. youth sport programs assisted by over three million adults.

Positive youth sport programs can not only improve a child physically, but also psychologically and socially.

Positive Outcomes of Youth Sports: ☺

- Physical: Learn sport skills, improve health and fitness.
- Psychological: Develop leadership skills, self-discipline, respect for authority, competitiveness, cooperativeness, sportsmanship, self-confidence, and FUN!
- Social: Opportunity to become part of expanding network of friends.

Negative Outcomes of Youth Sports: ☹

- Excessive *physical and/or psychological stress* on youth athletes.
- Rob youngsters of benefits of *spontaneous play*.
- Develop *antisocial attitudes* and behaviors by encouraging cheating, aggression, and at times even violence.
- Conducted primarily to satisfy *self-serving interests of adults* who try to achieve glory through young athletes.

New Trends in Youth Sports: Increasingly "youth sports" are becoming more and more "professional." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported their local youth sport program trends by citing: (4-16-03)

> *As the stakes and expectations for youth sports get higher, professional coaches are taking over. Virtually every youth swim team in metro Atlanta is guided by full-time professional coaches. Hiring a professional coach has become standard procedure with select soccer clubs, a highly competitive version of youth soccer. The use of professional coaches is emerging in travel baseball, a game more intense than the recreational ball children play.*

The advantage of having "Pro" coaches is that they are more knowledgeable about teaching sport skills and are less apt to play favoritism as found with "Daddyball" where the coach's child gets preferred treatment. However, the article also cited that sometimes Pro coaches can be too focused on their sport and early specialization. It is very unhealthy for younger athletes to "specialize"

in one sport with repetitive motions year after year that are geared towards high intensity and high competitiveness (To learn more about youth vs. professional sport issues, read the *"Philosophy of Youth Sports" Section*.). There was also NO mention of "child desires or wants" in the article. Are the children demanding "Pro" coaches and specialization year round? No. Pro coaching is adult driven because research indicates that primarily kids just want to have fun—not be professionally coached to win in high-intensity and year-round sport programs.

Why Kids Play Sports: Numerous surveys have been conducted with basically the same conclusions. Outcomes are ranked by importance. (1=most important):

1. ***To have fun.*** ☺
2. To improve skills.
3. To be with friends and make new ones.
4. For thrills and excitement.

How interesting that "winning" didn't even make the top four! In one study, about 90% of kids chose "playing" over winning because the enjoyment of sport is more important to them. Kids want to have fun. Too often adults want kids to assume adult pressures and stress. Let the kids enjoy being kids—let them play!

- Adults should also note that **NONE** of the youth sport surveys listed violence and parents attacking players, coaches, referees, and other parents as desired outcomes! *Maybe we should listen to our kids!*

Sport Drop Outs: The primary reason kids drop out of sports is a *shift of interests* to other involvements (especially with adolescents). The second major reason kids drop out of sports is because of *negative sport experiences* such as not playing enough, poor relationships, overemphasis upon winning, boredom, and excessive fear of failure. About 30-40% of dropouts are because of negative sport experiences. To minimize dropouts and maximize a quality youth sport experience, refer to the *"Bill of Rights for Young Athletes"* below.

Bill of Rights for Young Athletes

(National Association for Sport & Physical Education)

1. Right to participate in sports.
2. Right to participate at a level commensurate with each child's maturity & ability.
3. Right to have qualified adult leadership.
4. Right to play as a child and not as an adult.
5. Right to share in the leadership and decision making of sport participation.
6. Right to participate in safe and healthy environments.
7. Right to proper preparation for participation in sports.
8. Right to an equal opportunity to strive for success.
9. Right to be treated with dignity.
10. Right to have fun in sports.

References: Coaches who never lose, Sports and your child, Way to go, Coach!, Youth sports as a behavior setting for psychosocial interventions (Smith & Smoll, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2002) & The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (2003).

Youth Sports: Philosophy

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

"Kids Are NOT Pros!"

Youth sport programs can be wonderful and enriching experiences for young athletes. Unfortunately, sometimes adults ruin the quality of experience for kids and take away the joy for sport by imposing adult stressors on children. Adults can turn an enjoyable activity into a pressurized, competitive nightmare. Fun is no longer *just playing;* it's now defined as *winning.* To avoid negative experiences, and even decreased performance from high stress, youth sport programs should be child-centered instead of adult-dominated.

"Coaching youth sports should be about adults nurturing children who are playing a game, whatever that game may be, not about winning and losing."
--American Youth Soccer Organization/AYSO

Sport Models: There are two basic sport models. One is for children and the second is for adults. *Kids are NOT pros!* Youth sports should be "developmental" while adult professional sports are for entertainment and making money which are facilitated by "winning."

- **Developmental Model of Sport-CHILD:** (Goal=Develop the Individual) Most important product is not wins or dollars but the "quality of experience" for the child. Sport is an educational process where children learn about life through sport. Winning is one long-term goal but not the "primary" goal. Outcome is measured in skills learned and personal development rather than dollars and cents, championships, or win/loss.
- **Professional Model of Sport-ADULT:** (Goal=Entertainment & Make Money!) Winning is the priority goal because financial success depends upon win/loss records. Players are commodities to be bought, traded, and sold. A player's value is solely based on contribution to winning and profit making.

Winning: Winning is neither everything—nor the only thing. Young athletes should be taught that success is *"striving"* for victory by focusing on their *"best effort."* The effort should be first directed towards learning sport skills then improving the skills and then towards victory. Focusing on skill development then skill performance is being oriented to the "task" rather than oriented to the "outcome." Maximum effort and executing skills well will facilitate winning. Focusing on "winning only" will just decrease the quality of experience and sport performance by adding excessive stress to young athletes.

"Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming."
--John Wooden, UCLA Coaching Legend

Winning Out of Perspective (Smith & Smoll)

- When a display of comradeship with an opponent is considered a sign of weakness or when laughter is judged to be a lack of competitiveness.
- When a coach instructs athletes in strategies designed to take unfair advantage of an opponent.
- When youngsters are given drugs, coaxed to cheat, and intimidated to excel.
- When winning the game becomes more important than winning friends, respect, self-confidence, skill, health, and self-worth.

Winning Kept in Perspective

- The child comes first and winning is second.
- Rather than focusing on a win-loss record, the most important sport product is the quality of experience provided for young athletes.

Common Mistakes in Youth Sports

- **Youth sports as "feeder" programs:** Only 1 in 12,000 high school athletes make the pros and only 5% who sign pro baseball contracts ever play one day in the majors. Obviously, with such difficult odds, youth sports in general should not be geared towards making pro athletes. If individuals have the talent and desire to make the pros, then specialized training and coaching can be supplemented.
- **Parents living through their kids:** When a parent lives through the success or failure of their child, it puts an enormous amount of stress on the child. The pressure on a child to excel can be extreme when parents are "winners or losers" based upon their child's performance. A child must succeed or the parent's self-image is threatened. A "win at all costs" philosophy has negative implications not only for the youth sport environment, but also for the developing athlete.
- **Lack of knowledge about sport psychology:** Most coaches are knowledgeable about teaching their sport skills but rarely have formal training in creating a healthy psychological environment for young athletes. Understanding the philosophical differences between youth and adult sports and having some basic knowledge in Mental Skill Training interventions can have a significant positive influence on a coach's behavior. *A coach knowledgeable about creating psychologically healthy learning environments can create positive experiences for young athletes that could last a lifetime—and they can even improve performance!*

Positive Actions for Adults Involved in Youth Sports

- **Coaches:** Create positive experiences and outcomes by engaging in high levels of reinforcement (for both desirable performance and effort) and respond to mistakes with encouragement and technical instruction. Keep winning in perspective and emphasize "development" over "outcome."
- **Parents:** Don't put excessive pressure on your kids to win for your sake. Keep their youth sports child-centered and not adult-dominated. Encourage youth to give maximum effort, but don't demand winning only.

References: Coaches who never lose, Sports and your child, Way to go, Coach!, Youth sports as a behavior setting for psychosocial interventions (Smith & Smoll, 1997, 1999, 2002).

Arousal Regulation

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

"Energizing of Body & Mind"

Pump Them Up or Back Off? For optimal performance, an athlete needs to have an optimal level of arousal specific to their sport activity. A coach (or parent) that understands arousal can help athletes to optimize performance by knowing when to "raise or lower" arousal levels to match sport activity requirements i.e. get them pumped up or back off and leave them alone. One of the worst mistakes a coach can make is to disrupt an athlete when they are in their optimal arousal level or *"The Zone."* ***LEARN & USE: *Proper arousal increases performance; over arousal decreases performance!***

Definitions

The general concept of arousal is central to understanding other mental skills like relaxation, goal setting, mental imagery, and attention focus. The specific terms of arousal, stress, and anxiety are often viewed as the same; however, they represent slightly different constructs.

Arousal: A more general term than stress and anxiety. Arousal is usually thought of as a more "physiological" (body) state that can also affect the "cognitive" (mind) state. For this workbook, arousal is defined as an, ***"energizing function of the body and mind."***

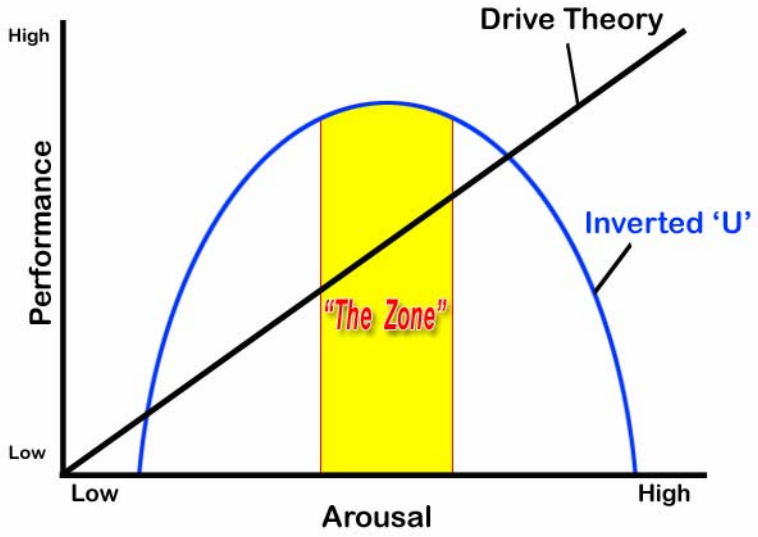
- **Stress:** A response involving appraisal of threat and increased physiological arousal. ***Stress is simply an, "imbalance between perceived demand and perceived capability."***
- **Anxiety:** Anxiety has two forms. One decreases performance and the other improves performance. For this workbook, only anxiety that decreases performance is addressed. ***Therefore, negative anxiety is, "a mental state that reduces the ability to focus and reduces performance."***

Summary!
To simplify, **over arousal produces "negative" stress**; stress causes anxiety, and anxiety can negatively impact performance and enjoyment.
****(For introductory purposes, just focus on over arousal increasing stress.)***

Arousal Theories: The two basic arousal theories that are easiest to understand are the ***"Drive Theory"*** and the ***"Inverted 'U' Hypothesis."*** Both work nicely to create awareness for the importance of optimal arousal, flow state, and *"The Zone"* of optimal performance. ****Note: Optimal arousal levels are specific to the individual and the activity.*** For example, a golfer will need a much different optimal arousal level than a football linebacker. A sprinter needs different arousal than the distance runner. A novice with few skills will be at a different arousal level than an experienced veteran that is highly skilled.

- **<u>Drive Theory</u>:** This theory states that the more arousal, the better the performance; therefore, there is a "linear" (straight line) relationship to arousal and performance. The Drive Theory works well as a starting point but is flawed. Research proves that increasing arousal levels are only good to a point—then arousal beyond this "optimal" level actually decreases performance.

- **<u>Inverted 'U' Hypothesis</u>:** This theory states that arousal and performance are related along a curvilinear relationship (like a bell curve). Rather, as arousal increases, so does performance *but only up to an optimal level.* Increases of arousal beyond "optimal" do not increase performance but actually hinder or decrease performance.



How to Use This Figure! Note that the *Drive Theory* line goes straight up towards the right. The more the line goes to the right, the higher the arousal level. As this line goes higher, it represents better performance. In general, the longer the line, the more aroused and better performing the athlete.

Now look at the *Inverted 'U'* bell-curved line. As the line gets longer, higher, and more towards the right, it also represents increased performance—but only to an optimal *"Zone"* somewhere in the middle. This means arousal should only be increased to a certain "band width" towards the center of the *Inverted 'U'* and NO MORE for optimal performance.

A knowledgeable coach that understands arousal will recognize when their athlete is in this "optimal zone" of performance—also referred to as "flow state" or simply "The Zone." ***When an athlete is in their zone or flow state—BACK OFF!*** Leave them alone to "just do it." Being in *The Zone* or flow state is what athletes live for—it is "the sweet spot" of ultimate enjoyment and the best performances.

Enter *The Zone*, Flow, & Automatic Function: The center area of the above *Inverted 'U'* is where athletes should be during competition. When an athlete is in their zone (or flow state), they can also enter into *"automatic functioning."* Being in automatic function is like being on autopilot. This is a state where athletes lose sense of time and a sense of ego. They flow from one movement to the next with high efficiency and concentration without concern for the crowd or other performance-robbing distractions.

Have you ever seen an athlete off in "their own world" during a great performance? This is what it's all about! Michael Jordan making a lay-up for the Bulls or Jerry Rice pulling down the impossible pass surrounded by defenders or even your child totally immersed in their activity. Watch a young child simply play without regard for the outside world—this is flow and auto function. Watch a cat stalk a bird—this is flow, auto function, and ultimate concentration!

As coaches (or parents), it is hard to back away and leave athletes to flow. However, "over coaching" can have devastating effects not only on performance—but on enjoyment as well.

Know when to coach and know when to trust in the athlete to do what they have been trained to do during practice.
Watching an athlete function independently well with confidence and flow is very rewarding as a coach or parent. ☺

Three Primary Influences of Arousal

1. **Task Complexity:** *The more complex and difficult the task, the higher the arousal.* It is important to break down or simplify skills so as to not overload the capacity of an athlete to learn all the different components. Start with simple skills then add secondary movements and challenges.

2. **Skill Level of Athlete:** *The greater the skill level of athlete, the less arousal they will have performing the skill.* A novice youngster just learning how to swing a bat will have more arousal than a veteran. The more experienced the athlete with a skill, the more likely they will be in a flow state or "auto function" which occurs in optimal arousal levels.

3. **Personality of Athlete:** ***Arousal is highly individualized.*** Some athletes function better at lower or higher arousal states than others. Some athletes quickly reach the optimal arousal level while others might take longer; some might gradually decrease performance when arousal is too high while others immediately crash and burn when they reach their threshold or peak arousal. ***Think of the Inverted 'U' as NOT being a perfect bell curve.*** No one's curve is exactly the same!

Who Regulates Arousal? The athlete (self) or coach and others (external).

"Increasing" Arousal: These are some simple ways to increase arousal for athletes. Be careful—what increases arousal for one athlete might not work for another athlete. ***Caution:** Athletes under stress likely need to lower arousal with relaxation techniques—not increase arousal!*

- ***Optimal arousal levels and adjusting them are highly individualized.*** *Generalized arousal adjustments "for the team" are limited. Always allow individual space for those athletes that don't fit the standard team arousal level or general arousal-increasing strategy.*

- Breathing: Increase the rhythm of breathing (without hyperventilating!) and imagine with each inhalation that energy is being taken in.
- Music and Video: These can be powerful energizers, but be aware that these can produce very different effects on different athletes.
  - One athlete might need *Celine Dion* while another might want nothing less than *Metallica*—these are NOT the same and can produce far different results!
- Energizing Imagery: Focus on machine images like a locomotive, cannon, Corvette, or on animal images such as a tiger, hawk, greyhound, or cheetah.
- Energizing Verbal Cues: Cues or "trigger words" used in conjunction with energizing imagery may effectively increase arousal levels.
  - Energizing words may include "explode, go, attack, control, blast, power, or psych up," etc. Athletes can also increase arousal by showing enthusiasm, emotion, and assertiveness providing that it is controlled.
- Drawing Energy from the Environment: This may include crowd, opponents, teammates, as well as the venue itself. For others the sun, National Anthem, team prayer or chant, the National Flag, etc. may serve as important energizing symbols.
- Distraction: If low arousal is caused by fatigue, then it may be appropriate to focus an athlete's attention away from fatigue using energizing imagery and cues.
- Goal Setting: By setting *realistic but difficult* personal performance and team goals arousal can be energized even in a mismatch scenario.
- Pep Talks: When appropriate, the old fashioned pep talk with energizing statements that are ***"carefully chosen"*** can raise energy arousal levels.
  - Note, if the same old statements are used over and over then the athletes become desensitized to these statements.
- Bulletin Boards: These visual messages can supplement a pep talk. Inspirational messages can be used, media reports that are challenging, or inflammatory statements made by opposing coaches or athletes.

How to Decrease Arousal: (See "Relaxation" Section)

References: Sport performance anxiety in youth athletes (Smith, Smoll, & Passer, 2002); Optimizing arousal level (Zaichkowsky & Takenaka, 1993); Arousal and performance (Zaichkowsky & Baltzell, 2001).

Relaxation

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

"Most of the best performances in sport occur when athletes feel loose and relaxed in the process of extending themselves."
--Terry Orlick, Olympic Psychologist

Relaxation is directly related to arousal and the *Inverted 'U' Hypothesis*. Relaxation can lower arousal levels that are too high. Proper relaxation facilitates optimal arousal, flow, and automatic function. Relaxation techniques can be implemented quickly during competition or slowly during free time before and after practice. Note that ***relaxation directly affects both the body and mind.***

"Personal best often occur when mind and muscle combine in free-flowing harmony."
--Terry Orlick

Positive Effects of Relaxation

1. **Physiological:** ***(Body)*** Heart rate slows, breathing slows and becomes regular, oxygen consumption decreases, muscle tension decreases, endorphin levels increase (the body's natural pain killer), and a feeling of calmness emerges.
2. **Psychological:** ***(Mind)*** Shift in focus to something other than that which caused the increased tension in the first place.
   - *"The shift away from self-evaluation and worry alone renders you less anxious and puts you more in control; the focus on relaxing your body, executing the next step in your game plan, or doing something joyful further reduces the tension." (Terry Orlick)*

Relaxation Exercises For Athletes

"In the course of relaxation training, people become more sensitive to what is going on inside their bodies and are better able to detect arousal in its beginning stages."
--Smith & Smoll, Coach Effectiveness Training Program

1. **Simple Relaxation: (Slow Down)**
   - Take three deep breaths
   - Move in "slow motion" (talk, walk, breath, blink, think***…slowly…***)
     - *These are great for "on-site" relaxation needs such as the athletic event or traveling to the event when the athlete has no privacy and might be embarrassed to stretch out for the PMR exercises below.*

2. **Advanced Relaxation: (Scene + Progressive Muscle Relaxation)**

   - **Personal Scene**: Create a "Relaxation Scene" that is a safe and comforting place. Think about someplace you've been or create a place you'd like to visit that would be relaxing. An open mountain meadow or cool mountain stream—an ocean sunset—sitting in your favorite chair—whatever gives you that feeling of being relaxed. Use all your senses "to feel" the relaxation instead of just "seeing" the relaxation scene…hang out a while…enjoy. ☺

   - **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**: (PMR) Find a comfortable place then lie on your back. Tense all the muscles in your body as tightly as you can—really tight—even your face and toes! Hold for about 30+ seconds. Gradually start releasing the tension starting at the very top of your scalp. For example, go from your scalp to your ears, eyes, face, jaw then down to your neck, shoulders arms, hands and fingers. Then go from your chest down your trunk into one leg, ankle, foot, and toes then to the other leg, ankle, foot, and toes. Keep everything else tight until you get to that body part. *Take at least 1-2 minutes to do this drill.*
     - **Pay attention to the sharp contrast between muscles with tension and muscles that are relaxed.** Which uses more energy—tension or relaxation? *Tension!* By being optimally relaxed, the body is released to perform at peak performance instead of wasting energy on tensing muscles that do not need to be tense. Tension also decreases speed of movement and efficiency of breathing.
     - There are numerous relaxation exercises and techniques. Only a very simplified version of the PMR method has been listed.

Relaxation Training for Children: Significant results have been cited for children as young as 5-6. *It is recommended that children practice relaxation techniques at least once if not twice daily until mastery is obtained.* The sessions do not have to be lengthy, but don't rush the relaxation! Give them plenty of time to "feel" the sensations. Positive results can occur in as little as one week. Have fun with them—it's nice to see kids that are calm, controlled, and relaxed.

Practical Application & Progression of Relaxation Skills: According to Olympic psychologist Terry Orlick, *"…if any coping strategy is to be effective under high-stress conditions, it must be well learned and practiced. You must be able to plug in that response in the space of one deep breath. To be able to do this effectively, you have to practice—first under low-stress conditions, then under medium stress, and finally under high-stress conditions. To ready yourself for the competitive arena, you must take advantage of all the stressful situations that you face so that you'll be practiced at responding effectively."*

References: In pursuit of excellence (Orlick, 2001); Mental states and physical performance (Diamant, 1991); Psychological skills for enhancing performance: Arousal regulation strategies (Gould & Udry, 1994).

Goal Setting

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

"Setting the big goals is the easy part for every athlete. Setting the smaller goals that get you to the bigger goals is the hard part."
--U.S. Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Mental Training Manual

Goal Definition & Research: Webster's defines a goal as, "…an object or end that one strives to attain; an aim." Extensive research has been conducted on goal setting for business and sport. The result—goal setting can work very well. Goals work well in sport but not as well as business goals. However, by following goal setting guidelines, sport goals can also be highly effective.

Recent studies show that athletes from youth through Olympic level set goals—but most of them only rate goal setting as "moderately effective." This means that they know goals can help, but they just don't know how to set goals properly to maximize their effectiveness.

--The Goal Continuum--

Process Goals>---------->Performance Goals>-------->Outcome Goals

Types of Goals

1. **Process Goals:** ***(Best for athletes just learning)*** Refers to improving form, technique, and strategy. Process goals are "task oriented." *Skill development is emphasized over winning* (or end-product outcomes).
   - There are many benefits to process goals for athletes. These goals improve concentration because they: are not as complicated or difficult to obtain, enhance self-efficacy (one's perception of chance for success), and are more controllable. Because attaining process goals are *more controllable*, they serve to control mental anxiety as goals are matched to current capabilities of the athlete. Note that process goals are especially helpful for younger athletes learning brand new skills and movements.
2. **Performance Goals:** Refers to improving overall performance.
   - Examples: Running faster or throwing farther. *Performance goals should still remain "task focused" instead of "outcome" focused towards winning.* The product of properly executed processes is optimized performance.
3. **Outcome Goals:** The "end product" that is usually "winning."
   - Popular sport culture places higher value on outcome goals i.e. trophies, medals, fame, money, etc. However, elite athletes have been shown to become more sophisticated with using process and performance goals to achieve outcome or "product-oriented" ends.
   - Outcome goals can be used carefully in practice for "motivation." For competition, it is best to focus on process and performance goals.
   - Outcome goals can be more effective in helping experienced athletes maintain focus and effort once they have mastered skills and they are able to perform these skills with *"automatic function"* while in *"The Zone"* or flow state.

- ***Caution:** Focusing on outcome goals can be hazardous for many athletes!* Doing each skill well (the process) will optimize the "performance" of the individual skills and movements. Performing at this maximum efficiency will then give the athlete the best outcome possible as the athlete focuses on the process steps and optimal performance of each process; thus, the outcome will take care of itself. *Focusing on the steps of success will get the athlete to the final and best possible outcome.*

Goal Type Summary

Don't over stress about the outcome! Stay focused on doing each skill process well with maximum effort and the best possible performance. Focusing on these smaller steps will give you the best outcome. If you worry only about "winning" (outcome), then you'll blow the small steps along the way that take you to the winner's circle. *Stay present in the moment, and don't lose focus because of thinking too much about the future!*

Youth Sport Tips: Who Is Setting the Goals?

1. **The Child:** *Keep youth sports child-centered!* If the child sets the goal then they own them. A "personal" goal is more valued than an impersonal goal that is forced on the child by an over-zealous adult.

- Children are more motivated to practice when they have personal goals focused on themselves because "winning" is secondary to improving the skill *process and performance* of these skills. Remember, process goals are more controllable than outcome goals, and they also can reduce anxiety.

➢ *Exception: Research indicates that for *very young children* team rather than individual goals can be more effective.

2. **The Adult:** *Don't allow "youth sports" to be adult-dominated!* Guide children to make "their own" goals focused on process and performance of skills more than on outcome or winning.

**Note: The above guidelines can also be beneficial in athlete/coach relationships for adult sports. An "individual's" goal can have intrinsic value and personal ownership. "Forced goals" that are not valued by the individual athlete will not be highly valued.*

***Goal Basics** (Smith & Smoll)*

1. Set specific goals in terms that can be measured.
2. Set difficult but realistic goals.
3. Set short-term as well as long-range goals.
4. Set process/performance goals over outcome goals.
5. Express goals in positive rather than negative terms.
6. Set goals for both practices and competition.

1. Set specific goals in terms that can be measured.

- Specific goals are more motivating than vague "just do-your-best" goals or no goals at all.

2. Set difficult but realistic goals. *(See table below)

- Difficult goals are challenging and prompt greater effort and persistence. If a goal is too easy—there is little challenge to perform.

3. Set short-term as well as long-range goals.

- Short-Term Goals: (Great for beginners!) More effective due to frequent evaluation of success that stimulates development of self-confidence when goals are attained. Motivating regardless of the outcome. Prevents

procrastination and premature discouragement. More flexible and controllable (can raise and lower to keep level of challenge optimal). Increased controllability makes it easier for performers to take credit for success as indicative of high ability and a good work ethic.

4. ***Set performance goals as opposed to outcome goals.*** *(See Previous)
5. ***Express goals in positive rather than negative terms.***

- For beginners, it is better to emphasize the positive rather than the negative of "minimizing mistakes or decreasing errors." For example, "That was a good effort, but if I held my arm at this angle I could hit the ball more often." As opposed to, "My arm position is all wrong…if I get it where it belongs I'd stop striking out!"

6. ***Set goals for both practices and competition.***

- NBA coach Pat Riley said, "You play like you practice." If the game is hard—get ready for hard competition with some hard practice sessions and goals that are appropriately difficult. ***The best Olympic performers make practice as close as possible to competition.*** If they have one chance to skate a routine, they go into practice and skate the routine "once"—not over and over again. The practice pressure to "nail it the first time" mimics the competition pressure; therefore, there is a high degree of transfer from practice to the final event. ****Caution:*** *You can't perform at maximum intensity and high-pressure all season during practice! Timing, experience, and fitness levels are critical when simulating final competition during practice sessions and must be planned in conjunction with training cycles.*

Setting Multiple-Goal Levels of Difficulty

➢ For best results, set three different levels of goal difficulty as outlined by Olympic psychologist Terry Orlick:

1. **Dream Goal**: ***(HARD)*** High difficulty and reflects a level of performance that is achievable only if athletes perform at top of their game i.e. experience flow and auto function in "*The Zone*."
2. **Realistic Goal**: ***(MODERATE)*** Moderate difficulty that is lower than dream goals but higher than self-acceptance goals. Reflects an accurate appraisal of a number of factors, such as current performance capabilities, situational factors, and quality of mental preparation, and would be the performance standard that could be *realistically expected with a good, but not great, performance. *Note: A majority of the more effective collegiate and Olympic goal setters prefer "Moderate" goals over very hard or difficult goals.*
3. **Self-Acceptance Goal**: ***(EASY)*** Defines the lowest level of performance that athletes can attain and still feel somewhat successful. Designed to help athletes deal with those situations when they perform poorly; helps them to take away positive things from a below-average performance.

Final Goal Tips: ☺ Athletes can control effort but not final outcome—keep them focused on maximum effort towards things they "can control" like process skills and performing the skills better as they master them and the game.

References: Goal setting in sport (Burton, Naylor, & Holliday, 2001); Embracing your potential (Orlick, 1998); Way to go coach! (Smith & Smoll, 2002).

Mental Imagery

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

"I see and feel myself throwing exactly the pitches that I want to throw before I ever begin to warm up at the ballpark."
--Nolan Ryan, Baseball Pitching Legend

More than just visual pictures—"feel it" with all your senses!

Mental Imagery (seeing and feeling) is another skill that can be used appropriately to enhance performance. Mental Imagery is not the answer for every sport performance issue and is not always the right intervention for performance enhancement. For example, an athlete that does not understand a skill movement would have a difficult time imaging the movement. The right intervention would be skill development coaching on technique—not imagery.

U.S. Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Mental Training Manual
"Imagery can be used as an additional form of practice to master a particular skill; or, imagery can be used to correct errors in skill execution…"

Visualization vs. Mental Imagery: Visualization is commonly thought to be the same as mental imagery; however, visualization is simply defined as the mental pictures or images that are constructed in the athlete's mind (Martens). While a part of mental imagery involves visualization, mental imagery itself goes beyond the mere visual pictures to include all of the athlete's senses such as hearing, touch, taste, and smell.

- *The notion is that the "more real" the image, the more transfer from mind to actual body movements. Therefore,* ***true mental imagery is multi-sensory*** *(also called multi-modal).*

The ability to understand and use mental imagery is extremely important for using many other mental skill interventions. For example, increasing arousal is enhanced with imagery if one "images" them self as a Corvette, eagle, or equivalent. Relaxation is more effective with multi-sensory imagery. Goal setting can be enhanced by imaging skill process and performance goals, and attention focus can also be greatly enhanced by imaging different competitive scenarios as distractions are filtered out.

Progressions: The whole idea with "Mental Skills Training" including imagery is to use it when the pressure is on during competition. To use mental skills during actual competition, one must progress the training systematically just as with physical training. Here are some suggestions for "starting easy" so one can eventually use imagery "during competition" and moments of high stress.

1. ***Neutral* Zone: It is best to start initial mental imagery practice somewhere quiet and private with no distractions.**

- Find a place where distractions can be eliminated or significantly controlled. As one gets better with imagery, one can "add distractions" on purpose to more closely simulate the real world during competition.

2. ***Regular* Training: Initiate and increase imagery a little bit at a time during routine "low-stress" practice sessions.**

- Don't overload trying to image every possible movement or scenario. Just isolate one skill that needs improvement then use a mini-imagery session right before practice. Make sure imagery is used at the actual practice site—not just in the locker room or at home.

3. ***Simulated* Competition Training: One step closer to the real world.**

- If mental skills and imagery can't be used during competition then they aren't worth much. One won't be able to use imagery efficiently under stress unless one *practices imagery under stress.* For example, take new mental skills into a major practice session where the pressure is on to make the team or achieve a certain performance standard before a big competition or event.

4. ***Competition:* The moment of truth!**

- This is what it's all about—using imagery and mental skills under pressure to enhance performance despite the odds, difficulty, and distractions!

> "To have been there before without ever having been there—that is the goal of simulation." *Terry Orlick, Olympic Psychologist*

Coaching Tips on Mental Skills Progressions: Eventually you want your athletes to be calm under fire—but you can't expect them to master mental skills during high-stress pressure immediately. Allow them to feel successful without stress and distractions during practice. As they improve, systematically start adding more and more pressure along with *"planned distractions" that will simulate competition during practice*. Eventually your athletes will be able to make the transition from practice to competition with their mental skills.

Pro golfer Tiger Woods has been very successful mental skill progressions. His father would create many distractions during his golf practice—screaming, yelling, walking around, throwing objects—all of which taught Tiger to use his skills under pressure to remain controlled. Tiger spent years mastering mental skills—he did not start off being able to create positive imagery during high-stress pressure practices. Be patient and systematic, and you'll be happy with your athletes' results!

Practice—How Often & How Much? It is best to practice mental skills including imagery daily. For younger children and imagery, up to five minutes per day would be fine. Teens might be able to handle 5-10 successfully while adult athletes are recommended to practice mental imagery about 10-15 minutes per day. Most Olympic and world champions do at least 15 minutes per day and even more before major competitions. ***Daily practice is highly recommended.***

References: USOC Sport psychology training manual (Bauman, Haberl, McCann, & Peterson, 2002); Coaches guide to sport psychology (Martens, 1987); Imagery interventions in sport (Murphy, 1994); Enhancing children's sport & life experiences, In pursuit of excellence (Orlick, 2001); Way to go Coach! (Smith & Smoll, 2002).

Attention Focus

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

"Where your focus goes, everything else follows."
--Terry Orlick, Olympic Psychologist

Many sport psychology experts cite attention focus as *one of the most* important mental skills while some, like Olympic psychologist and author Terry Orlick, feel that attention focus is "the most" important mental skill. Orlick cites, *"Focusing is the most important mental skill associated with ongoing learning and consistent high-level performance."* So is focused attention important? YES!

Definition: Attention and concentration are closely related. For this workbook, the term attention will be used. A good definition of attention comes from William James in 1890 that cited, "Attention implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others." This basic definition can still be applied to today's sport mental skill of attention focus. ***When an athlete is focused, they block out what is not important so they can attend to what is important.*** Blocking these distractions enhances performance as the athlete attends to ***relative and immediate tasks***.

Attention & Other Mental Skills: Attention focus is closely related to the other mental skills previously discussed (arousal regulation, relaxation, goal setting, and mental imagery). For optimal performance enhancement, all of these skills should be woven together while *prioritizing attention focus.*

Attention & Arousal: Attention focus has a great deal to do with arousal. Being in the *optimal zone* of arousal (or flow state) is also an area where an athlete has the most controlled attention focus.

- Remember the *"The Zone" (or flow state)* in the *Inverted 'U' Hypothesis*? This is the state where athletes flow into "automatic function" whereby they block distractions. Remember how disruptive a coach or parent can be that tries to interfere with this flow state? ***Highly focused attention in "The Zone" should NOT be disturbed by coaches (or parents)!*** Allow the athlete to experience the best of sports through attention focus, flow, and optimal performance. ☺

"Your best focus may sometimes feel like a non-focus." --*Terry Orlick*

Focus & Automatic Function: Focus is sometimes called "non-focus" because of *automatic function*. The more skilled the athlete, and the more the athlete functions in the *Optimal Zone of Arousal and Performance* (center bandwidth of *Inverted 'U'*), the more an athlete enters automatic functioning. Recall that an athlete in auto function just flows from one movement to the next with little effort—*they make it look easy.*

- Flowing in auto function also enables an athlete to lose track of time. They stay aware of relevant play, but they seem to function in a sort of vacuum.

Thus, being focused in the moment while in *The Zone* enables the athlete to seemingly function with a sort of "non-focus."

- *If the above is confusing think of Michael Jordan in his prime. Jordan did not attend to the crowd—he just flowed automatically from one play to the next. He played with high-intensity yet relaxed—he was a master athlete in The Zone of Optimal Function!*

Selective Attention & Filtering: Selective attention refers to selecting certain information for processing while *filtering out* or ignoring non-relevant information. For example, ***what does an athlete need to pay attention to as they perform?*** Does a baseball batter need to listen to the catcher talk trash or do they need to filter out the catcher's comments? The comments are not important. What is important is watching the pitch. The batter needs to filter out the comments along with any other performance-robbing distractions.

- ***Think of the cat stalking a bird.*** This is a perfect example of selective attention! The cat is very focused on the bird while at some remote level still being aware enough of the environment to notice another animal stalking it like the dog next door. The cat "filters out" everything possible except what is relevant to catching the bird and staying alive itself (dog or other predators). The cat moves in a flow state with control—it has heightened arousal optimal for the task but is also appropriately relaxed…don't think so? You try sitting in one position for over an hour staring at a bird! This is referred to in sport psychology as *"relaxed intensity."*
- ***The cheetah is an example of "relaxed intensity"*** as it runs at over 60 mph with perfect fluid relaxed strides…what beauty! This relaxed intensity is what athletes also aim for—it's Michael Jordan making the lay up easy, Terrell Owens pulling down the impossible catch, and Kristy Yamaguchi landing the perfect jump.

"A fully connected focus releases you from everything irrelevant and connects you totally with your experience or performance. It is a mind-place where nothing else in your world exists apart from being totally connected with what you are engaged in or experiencing at that moment."
--Terry Orlick, "In Pursuit of Excellence"

Attentional Width vs. Task: Think of attention as a band width. Sometimes an athlete needs to attend to a *broad width*, but other situations call for a very *narrow width* of attention. Broad attention allows a person to see several things at once. Narrow attention limits a person to only one or two cues. Athletes need to use both broad and narrow; however, some sports or sport tasks are focused more towards one bandwidth than the other.

- In comparing sports, an archer needs a very narrow attention width—the target Bullseye! Running back a punt return in football will take a broader width of attention. In comparing the varied demands of a football quarterback who must perform numerous tasks during one play, the QB will need to first

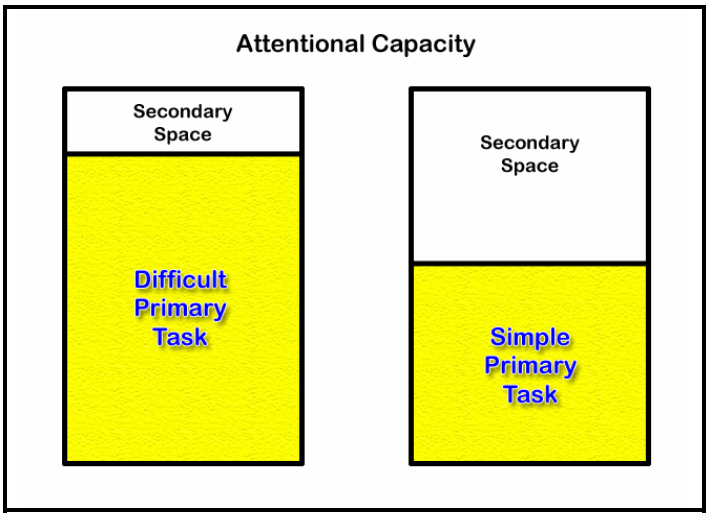
look for receivers down field with a "broad" attentional width. Once the open receiver is spotted, the QB must quickly narrow his attention so he can concentrate on throwing the ball accurately. While narrow attention is prioritized right before throwing, getting smashed by linemen is still part of relevant play! A good QB will be able to quickly switch from "narrow" (looking at receiver) to "broad" (seeing the peripheral linemen) to narrow (avoiding the close proximity linemen) to broad (finding a receiver again) to narrow (throwing the pass!).

- *Attentional Switching-Broad to Narrow: The more skilled and experienced the athlete, the quicker they can "switch" back and forth from broad to narrow focus. Young players can struggle with efficient switching until they increase skill levels and game knowledge.*

Attentional Capacity

There are two basic space categories when learning a new skill—the primary space (and task) and secondary space (and tasks). There is a limited amount of brain processing space to learn these tasks—this is called "attentional capacity." As with computer RAM, there is only so much memory capacity to perform various operations. If a new primary task is simple, you have more space left for secondary tasks. If the new task is complex, very little space will be left for the secondary tasks. For learning new sport skills, it is best to keep the primary task very simple and the secondary tasks very limited in number. ***Hint: Keeping primary tasks simple will help limit high arousal levels and unnecessary "tunneling."***

- For example, teaching baseball hitting to young children is much easier using a T-ball post than using a real live pitcher. With the T-ball, the new batter focuses on swinging at the stationary ball. With a live pitcher, not only does the batter have to perform the primary task of swinging cleanly (which is hard enough!), but they have to learn secondary tasks of ball velocity changes and pitch angles, etc.



Beginners need a simple primary task!

Other Topics Related to Attention Focus

Arousal & Tunneling: In general, high arousal levels default to narrow attentional width. A narrow attention width is called "tunneling." Note that an athlete can still manipulate attentional width to narrow even with low arousal (a golfer putting or the archer for example).

- High arousal and tunneling is important to understand when coaching younger athletes. Children learning sport skills can become highly aroused when "overloaded." If they aren't coached towards lower arousal into a more optimal state, they can easily tunnel and "filter out" the important cues that they should be noticing.

➢ Bottom Line: Proper arousal can help an athlete avoid unnecessary tunneling and decreased performance from missing basic cues. While some amount of filtering increases performance, *too much filtering leads to tunneling (excessive narrowing) which blocks important input needed to optimize performance and game adjustments.*

Distractions: Athletes are famous for being distracted at the worst times—and especially young athletes! There are two basic sources of distractions. Understanding these categories can help the coach to minimize "some" distractions and mentally train athletes to filter out the others that cannot be actually eliminated.

1. External Distraction Sources: Crowd noise, environment noise (sirens, PA, car alarms), fakes of an opponent, and **even the coach (or parent)!**
   - ***Coaching Tips:*** *Use selective attention to filter out irrelevant cues and distractions. Use mental imagery to train athletes how to deal with crowd noise. Use "coach-planned distractions" during practice to condition athletes how to deal with interference despite the excessive environmental distractions. Keep athletes task-focused on "process and performance." Use knowledge of "The Zone," flow states, and auto function to keep yourself from interfering and distracting your own athletes!*
2. Internal Distraction Sources: Negative self-talk like excessive thinking about past failures or subjective feelings of fatigue.
   - ***Coaching Tips:*** *Use "positive mental imagery" to condition athletes away from negative images of themselves. Use energizing imagery to raise arousal levels to reduce feelings of fatigue. Use relaxation techniques as "positive distractions" to break "negative self-talk cycles." Keep athletes task-focused on "process and performance" which facilitate more controllability.*

"At all levels in sport, it is the athletes' time to focus in on their performance and the coaches' time to free them to do it."
--Terry Orlick, "In Pursuit of Excellence"

References: Attention (Abernethy, 2001); USOC Sport psychology mental training manual (Bauman, Haberl, McCann, & Peterson, 2002); Attention in sport (Cox, 1998); In pursuit of excellence (Orlick, 2001); Concentration (Weinberg & Gould, 1999).

Personal Tips: *Keep It Simple!*

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

"Beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity."
--Plato

After years of studying sport psychology and personally implementing Mental Skills Training as an athlete, coach, student, and professional trainer, allow me to offer some personal tips based on my experiences and practical application for each of the five major intervention categories and youth sports philosophy covered in my workbook. I have used these interventions successfully from youth sport coaching to my international competition as an endurance cyclist. Most people do not understand sport psychology, and unfortunately, some even feared my mental side of training to the point of suggesting I was promoting the occult! Sport psychology is not magic, hocus pocus, or the occult—it is a science backed by decades of research which has benefited thousands of athletes…with a little work and focus, sport psychology and Mental Skills Training can also benefit you!

Youth Sports: Even if you are an adult athlete with no children that has no interest in youth sports you can benefit from youth sport philosophy and youth sport coaching psychology! What can we learn from kids? Have fun and don't lose yourself in the prison of solely thinking about winning at all cost! It sounds "too simple" for adults; however, research cites professional and Olympic athletes' recommendations to enjoy the sport and competition while you have the opportunity to participate and compete. These elite athletes also caution to stay focused in the moment instead of allowing yourself to think ahead about winning the game at the risk of losing control of current actions. Remember when you first got involved in sports and how much fun you had? Go back to this level of enjoyment! You'll find a "release" of the pressure to win at all cost, and from my experience, will then see an improvement in your performances. As adults we can also learn from younger athletes to stay focused on the basics for optimal performance—don't forget the small steps over the years that got you to where you are today. Olympians to adult recreational athletes can all learn from youth sports and children.

1. **<u>Arousal Regulation</u>:** An understanding of arousal and how it factors into performance is the place to start your Mental Skills Training journey. Understanding that "too much arousal" will decrease performance is huge! As a younger athlete, I wasted too much energy and decreased my performance in numerous events because I lost control being over aroused. Be careful to keep yourself or your athletes from breaking out of *The Zone* bandwidth, and you'll be amazed with the results!

2. **Relaxation:** Relaxation techniques can help regulate the arousal level so you stay in *The Zone* or stay under *The Zone* until the right time. For a simple start, just take three deep and cleansing breaths. Three breaths work on a number of levels. Even three deep breaths will produce a physiological response of increased relaxation as you "let go" and decreased heart rate. The three breaths also serve as a "distraction technique" to switch the focus away from thoughts that are creating excessive arousal, anxiety, fear, or other performance decreasing thoughts. At the advanced level, I have also successfully used the *Body Scan* method to quickly in a matter of seconds scan my body for energy-robbing tension then breathe into these areas to let the tension go. *Body Scans* can be done at the starting line or even in the middle of heated competition and have even been used by Olympians at the starting line immediately before competition. You can start learning *Body Scans* by taking three deep breaths. As you let out the third breath think about any tension present in your body draining out from the top of your head down to the bottom of your toes in just a second or two as you exhale. These techniques have worked well for me in training and competition. Tension makes you tight and slows you down—just let it go so you can flow…

3. **Goal Setting:** Having different "levels" of goals has worked well for me. Olympic psychologist Terry Orlick has the best goal level recommendations in my opinion with his Dream, Realistic, and Self-Acceptance goal design. It's nice to have a dream goal because you just never know…but you also need to have a realistic goal based upon logic and training cycles. The Self-Acceptance goal really just serves to make you think about what can be learned from mistakes made during a lower level of performance. Remember—mistakes give valuable input for making adjustments, corrections, and improvements for the future. All athletes make mistakes as they rise in ability, but "smart athletes" make adjustments so they can improve. It's also good to have short-term goals directed towards the process because these can be controlled easier which promotes better day-to-day confidence and success.

4. **Mental Imagery:** The best explanation I can offer about the power of mental imagery is my own experience prior to my first Race Across America (RAAM) team cycling competition. The RAAM started in Los Angeles and traveled non-stop 3,000 miles across the country to Savannah, Georgia. In the middle of the race loomed the Colorado Rockies where we had to cross over the 11,000 foot summit at Wolf Creek Pass. It was impossible for me to travel to Wolf Creek Pass for training. I had to rely on my imagery skills to "rehearse" the extreme conditions and steep grades that I would be required to climb for my team. I "felt" this climb from every conceivable angle and condition the previous year during preparation including wind, cold, rain, ice, snow, and darkness. When I finally got to Wolf Creek Pass it was as if I had trained there for years. I

felt extremely comfortable because I had been there before—but only through mentally imaging the environment. Mental imagery works. At the advanced level I have also used imagery to rehearse numerous race conditions, attacks, counter attacks, and other various scenarios. Using imagery to correct "negative" competition scenarios is an advanced technique, so don't use this with athletes just learning imagery. However, imagery has allowed me to create "game plans" that I can feel for multiple race situations before I ever get to the race. An understanding of using mental imagery with progressions is also very important. If you can't use the imagery skills during competition then it has little value. Practicing during "low stress" conditions then working up to the "high stress" conditions is the way to use imagery at the highest level of efficiency.

5. **Attention Focus:** Focused attention is the ultimate mental skill and the one that the other four lead towards and optimize. Optimal arousal, relaxation, goals, and imagery all facilitate the highest level of performance. Two key areas of attention focus have helped me greatly—automatic function and filtering. My knowledge and application of automatic function and filtering out distractions has allowed me to train and race in *The Zone* and given me consistent high-performance results. When you are in automatic function, you don't waste any energy—you just flow. You don't allow yourself to be distracted by input that is not important for increasing performance. In a way you are in a "protective bubble" or shield as you perform your tasks. I had a high school cross country team that was complimented at a large invitational. Parents noticed that my kids had a "focus" and concentration prior to the race that kept them from being distracted and wasting energy. My athletes had developed their attention focus and other mental skills through weekly Mental Skills Training sessions—and it really showed in their performance and poise. How do you start with attention focus? Simply ask yourself, "What do I need to think about to improve my performance today?" It will not be what you had for dinner last night or what you want to watch on TV or the negative "talking smack" from the crowd and competitors. Wind conditions, breathing rhythms of opponents, possible coach comments, etc. can be valuable inputs to take in while you filter out the unnecessary inputs.

While the world of sport psychology is immense, my simple tips and this workbook can definitely help you to get started. Just like physical workouts, mental workouts must also be a part of your weekly training plans. Practice—you'll get there.

There is nothing like flowing in *The Zone of Optimal Function* as an athlete free of distractions—it is shear joy, exhilaration, and happiness…it's what we as athletes live and train for…so go there and enjoy the experience. ☺

Mental Skills Training Summary

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

Enhancement of Mental Skills Training: Practical Recommendations

After careful review of the current literature on mental skills training, the following recommendations are offered to further enhance the positive benefits of mental skills training on athletic performance. First, as with any successful physical training program, mental skills must also be practiced with an attention to quality and consistency. Mental skills are not magic; success can only be realized through a positive dedication and belief in the abilities to enhance performance through regular quality practice. Mental skills will fail unless they are taught and practiced correctly just like any other sport skill.

Secondly, mental skills should never be used to replace a professional sport psychologist (Martens, 1987). Mental skills training is not designed to correct major abnormal behavioral problems already present in the personal life of an athlete. *Mental skills Training interventions are designed specifically for assisting the normal athlete to positively handle the additional stresses found with increasing levels of athletic competition in approaching supernormal behavior.*

Third, mental skills training should be implemented by coaches with concern to specificity and individualization regarding the athlete, sport, and environmental conditions. Coaches and parents must realize that each athlete and sport operates in different optimal zones of arousal and that different interventions will have varying effects depending upon the individual athlete.

Lastly, the literature has recommended that the best method of mental skills training is in fact the multi-method approach (or also commonly called the multi-modal or polysensory method of mental imagery and skills intervention). For example, just as students in the classroom learn differently in regards to visual versus auditory processing skills; athletes are also more receptive to certain types of imagery interventions than others; hence, the multi-modal approaches seek to ensure that each athlete receives performance enhancement from at least one of the various methods used in a comprehensive polysensory program.

Teaching Mental Skills Training: From Theory to Practice

A problem exists in current sport psychology—most of the literature surrounding mental imagery and mental skills training is too complex for the average sport coach, athlete, personal trainer, or parent. A challenging question arises—how can sport psychology practioners further simplify the existing introductory sport psychology intervention programs without losing the quality and essence of the original designs? Far too many coaches do not even begin to approach sport psychology interventions; however, the literature has clearly demonstrated that

sport psychology methods such as Mental Skills Training have been of practical use to coaches and athletes at many levels from youth sports through professional and Olympic competition.

Empowerment: "Hands-On" Practical Workshops

Based upon the significant positive results of selected workshops on Mental Skills Training for coaches, athletes, and parents, more workshops can, and should, be conducted at the local and community level. Enhancing the enjoyment of sport can enhance the quality of life for athletes. Enhancing the performance of sports can enhance the levels of self-efficacy and confidence in these athletes.

In concern to youth sport programs, Mental Skills Training workshops can be a valid method of delivery for presenting introductory mental skills training and developmental philosophy of youth sports that can facilitate the enhancement of youth sports enjoyment and performance.

Our youth are a national treasure as poignantly stated by 19th century novelist and politician Benjamin Disraeli, "The youth of a nation are the trustees of posterity." Childhood is an important time for healthy physical *and* psychological development. Good youth sport programs have many positive benefits and can help to develop the next generation. Mental Skills Training at the youth sport level can only help to enhance the quality of youth sports—and our youth that are the future leaders of tomorrow.

The information is this workbook is by no means exhaustive or a complete collection of all mental skills interventions. The workbook merely serves as a gateway into the positive world of sport and exercise psychology and Mental Skills Training. For more research and information, please refer to the Reference and Reading Recommendation Sections or contact the author about personal workshops on Mental Skills Training.

Reading Recommendations for Youth & Adult Sports Psychology

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)

Youth Sports Note: Anything written by Dr. Ronald Smith and Dr. Frank Smoll is worth reading concerning youth sports. Dr. Smith and Dr. Smoll created the ***Coach Effectiveness Training Program***™ which is the most successful and research supported youth sport psychology program in the U.S. Smith and Smoll have over 20 years of research on coaching behaviors and how they affect athletes.

Terry Orlick: Dr. Orlick, Olympic Psychologist/Professor, is another excellent source for learning about sport psychology and Mental Skills Training. His research, articles, and books have all proved enlightening and enhanced my sport training, enjoyment of physical activities, and competitive experiences. I highly recommend Orlick's work and especially his book "In Pursuit of Excellence."

LEVEL I: INTRODUCTORY & CREATING AWARENESS

"Coaches Who Never Lose…Making Sure Athletes Win, No Matter What the Score: A 30-Minute Primer for Coaching Effectiveness" (24 pages, $4.50)

- (Frank Smoll & Ronald Smith, 1997) ISBN #1886346038
- ***MUST READ!***

"Sports and Your Child: A 50-Minute Guide for Parents" (46 pages, $6.50)

- (Frank Smoll & Ronald Smith, 1999) ISBN #1886346054
- ***MUST READ!***

LEVEL II: MORE DEPTH & IMPLEMENTATION

"Way to Go, Coach!—A Scientifically-Proven Approach to Youth Sports Coaching Effectiveness" (205 pages, $17.95)

- (Ronald Smith & Frank Smoll, 2002) ISBN #1886346070
- Great source for coaches wanting to create optimal coaching environments and coaches that are ready to begin mental skills training.

"In Pursuit of Excellence: How to Win in Sport and Life Through Mental Training" (242 pages, $15.95)

- (Terry Orlick, 2001) ISBN #0736031863
- *Terry Orlick, PhD, is a world famous Olympic psychologist, author, lecturer, and professor from Canada. Orlick has over 28 years of Olympic experience and is the "king of focus and flow." His books are well written and emphasize the "joy of movement" that can be experienced in successful sport and exercise activities.*

"United States Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Mental Training Manual" (91 pages, $9.95, order direct from USOC @ 1-719-866-4516)

- (Bauman, Haberl, McCann, & Peterson, 2002)
- ➢ *Good source for one-page athlete worksheets, forms, and surveys.*

"Body-Mind Mastery: Creating Success in Sport and Life" (166 pages, $12.95)

- (Dan Millman, 1999) ISBN #1577310942
- ➢ *Former world champion athlete Dan Millman does a great job getting one to think about moving "naturally" as an athlete and in life. Joy of life and movement are emphasized along with some Eastern Zen philosophy.*

LEVEL III: STUDY & RESEARCH

"Sport Psychology: Concepts and Applications" (492 pages, $66.95)

- (Richard Cox, 2001) ISBN #0072489154
- ➢ *This is one of the best sport psychology text books to be found. It's comprehensive yet compact and easy to understand. Excellent reference source.*

"Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology" (538 pages, $55.00)

- (Robert Weinberg & Daniel Gould, 1999) ISBN #0880118245
- ➢ *Weinberg and Gould are two of the most respected sport psychologists in the U.S. today. Their book is very comprehensive and thorough with plenty of graphics. Excellent reference source.*

***Pricing Note:** Above prices are approximate and can vary depending upon region and outlet.

REFERENCES

Abernethy, B. (2001). Attention. In R. Singer, H. Hausenblas, & C. Janelle (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sport psychology* (2nd ed.). (pp. 53-85). New York, NY: Wiley.

Atlanta Journal-Constitution. (n.d.). Coaches for hire: Pros bounce 'daddyball'. Retrieved April 16, 2003, from http://www.accessatlanta.com/ajc/sports/0403/15coach.html

Bauman, J., Haberl, P., McCann, S., & Peterson, K. (2002). *Sport psychology mental training manual* (Rev. ed.). Colorado Springs, CO: United States Olympic Committee.

Burton, D., Naylor, S. & Holliday, B. (2001). Goal setting in sport: Investigating the goal effectiveness paradox. In R. Singer, H. Hausenblas, & C. Janelle (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sport psychology* (2nd ed.). (pp. 497-528). New York, NY: Wiley.

Cox, R.H. (1998). *Sport psychology: Concepts and applications* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

Davies, S. & West, J. D. (1991). A theoretical paradigm for performance enhancement: The multimodal approach. *The Sport Psychologist, 5,* 167-174.

Diamant, L. (1991). How psychology relates to sports, exercise, and fitness. In L. Diamant (Ed.), *Mind-body maturity: Psychological approaches to sports, exercise, and fitness.* (pp. 5-16). New York, NY: Hemisphere.

Diamant, L. R., & Baker, R. M. (1991). Mental states and physical performance. In L. Diamant (Ed.). *Mind-body maturity: Psychological approaches to sports, exercise, and fitness.* (pp. 255-264). New York, NY: Hemisphere.

Gould, D., Eklund, R. C., & Jackson, S. A. (1993). Coping strategies used by U.S. Olympic wrestlers. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 64,* 83-93.

Gould, D. & Udry, E. (1994). Psychological skills for enhancing performance: Arousal regulation strategies. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise, 26,* 478-485.

Greenspan, M. J. & Feltz, D. L. (1989). Psychological interventions with athletes in competitive situations: A review. *The Sport Psychologist, 3,* 219-236.

Jones, J. G. & Hardy, L. (1990). The academic study of stress in sport. In D.H. Holding (Ed.), *Stress and performance in sport* (pp. 3-16). Chichester, England: Wiley.

Jones, R. H. (2003). *Mental skills training for youth coaches and parents.* Unpublished master's thesis, California State University, Northridge.

Lee, A. B. & Hewitt, J. (1987). Using visual imagery in a floatation tank to improve gymnastic performance and reduce physical symptoms. *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 18,* 223-230.

Lee, C. (1990). Psyching up for a muscular endurance task: Effects of image content on performance and mood state. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 12,* 66-73.

Martens, R. (1987). *Coaches guide to sport psychology.* Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Murphy, S. M. & Jowdy D. P. (1992). Imagery and mental practice. In T.S. Horn (Ed.), *Advances in sport psychology* (221-250). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Murphy, S. M. (1994). Imagery interventions in sport. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise, 26,* 486-494.

Musashi, M. (2003). The book of five rings. (T. Cleary, Trans.). New York: Barnes & Noble. (Original work published 1643)

National Alliance of Youth Sports, Youth Sport Violence News. (n.d.). Untitled document. Retrieved December 31, 2002, from http://www.timeoutforbettersportsforkids.org/news/main.htm

Orlick, T. & Partington, J. (1988). Mental links to excellence. *The Sport Psychologist, 2,*105-130.

Orlick, T. (2001a). Enhancing children's sport and life experiences. In R. Singer, H. Hausenblas, & C. Janelle (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sport psychology* (2nd ed.). (pp. 465-474). New York, NY: Wiley.

Orlick, T. (2001b). *In pursuit of excellence.* (3rd ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Partington, J. & Orlick, T. (1991). An analysis of Olympic sport psychology consultants' best-ever consulting experiences. *The Sport Psychologist, 5,* 183-193.

Smith, R. E., & Smoll, F. L. (1997). *Coaches who never lose: Making sure athletes win, no matter what the score*. Portola Valley, CA: Warde.

Smith, R. E., & Smoll, F. L. (1999). *Sports and your child.* Portola Valley, CA: Warde.

Smith, R. E., & Smoll, F. L. (2002a). *Children and youth in sport.* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Smith, R. E., & Smoll, F. L. (2002b). Coaching behavior research and intervention in youth sports. In R. Smith, & F. Smoll (Eds.), *Children and youth in sport* (pp. 211-231). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Smith, R. E., & Smoll, F. L. (2002c). *Way to go, coach!* (2nd ed.). Portola Valley, CA: Warde.

Smith, R. E., & Smoll, F. L. (2002d). Youth sports as a behavioral setting for psychological interventions. In Van Raalte, J. L., & Brewer, B. W. (Eds.), *Exploring sport and exercise psychology.* (pp. 341-371). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Smith, R. E., & Smoll, F. L., & Passer, M. W. (2002). Sport performance anxiety in youth athletes. In R. Smith, & F. Smoll (Eds.), *Children and youth in sport.* (pp. 501-536). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Suinn, R. M. (1986). *Seven steps to peak performance: The mental training manual for athletes.* Toronto, Canada: H. Huber.

Suinn, R. M. (1987). Psychological approaches to performance enhancement. In May, J. R. & Asken M. J. (Eds.), *Sport psychology.* (pp. 41-57). New York, NY: PMA.

Suinn, R. (1993). Imagery. In R. Singer, M. Murphy, & L. Tennant (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sport psychology* (pp. 492-510). New York, NY: Macmillian.

Tripp, R. T. (Ed.). (1970). The international thesaurus of quotations. New York: Harper & Row.

Vealey, R. S. (1994). Current status and prominent issues in sport psychology interventions. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise, 26,* 495-502.

Weinberg, R. S. (1994). Goal setting and performance in sport and exercise settings: A synthesis and critique. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise, 26(4)*, 469-477.

Weinberg, R. S., & Gould, D. (1999). Foundations of sport and exercise psychology. (2nd ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Weinberg, R. S., Seabourne, T. G., & Jackson, A. (1981). Effects of visuo-motor behavior rehearsal, relaxation, and imagery on karate performance. *Journal of Sport Psychology, 3,* 228-238.

Weinberg, R. S., Seabourne, T. G., & Jackson, A. (1987). Arousal and relaxation instructions prior to the use of imagery. *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 18,* 205-214.

Zaichkowsky, L., & Takenaka, K. (1993). Optimizing arousal level. In R. Singer, M. Murphy, & L. Tennant (Eds.). *Handbook of research on sport psychology* (pp. 492-510). New York, NY: Macmillian.

Zaichkowsky, L. D., & Baltzell, A. (2001). Arousal and performance. In R. Singer, H. Hausenblas, & C. Janelle (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sport psychology* (2nd ed.). (pp. 319-339). New York, NY: Wiley.

"If the mind can conceive, the body can achieve."
--Jack LaLanne

For information on Mental Skill Training workshops, health/fitness related workshops, services, and other performance-driven results, please contact Ron Jones.

Ron Jones, MS
ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor
Licensed Corporate Wellcoach
Licensed USA Cycling Coach

Contacts
Phone: 678.227.2566
Website: www.ronjones.org
E-Mail: ron@ronjones.org