

Total Athlete Development Excerpt 3

Exercises to Improve Concentration

Concentration is being aware of only the present - not the future and or the past. Athletes must find a "focus point" as their center of concentration. The focus point of athletes should be on an object in the field of play that is constant and the target for their skillful performance. Some examples would be: the back of the basketball rim; the tennis ball; the golf ball; the bull's eye of a target; the hands of their intended receiver; the catcher's mitt, etc.

Once an individual has chosen and centered his or her focus of concentration, they should let their mind remain focused on that object to the complete exclusion of all outside stimuli and thoughts. The mind becomes "one with the ball." A player's subconscious mind knows how to perform the skill, he or she must trust it. They should relax and let the body perform naturally.

When concentrating, a player's complete conscious mental attention should be on the successful completion of the skill to be performed and should remain focused on that skill until it is completed. The player must only have a positive mental picture in their mind of successfully performing the skill.

They must also have a positive feeling of confidence in his potential and ability to successfully accomplish the intended task. If any negative feelings or thoughts enter the mind while performing, even for a split second, the player has broken their concentration and performance may be negatively affected.

When a player's main goal in competition is to win, focus of concentration becomes distorted. Since winning is the main concern, the mind naturally thinks about the score instead of performance. This is one reason many promising athletes never become champions. While competing, they are thinking about the future (winning) instead of focusing their concentration on their present performance and playing up to their potential. Winning should be secondary goal which is reached as a result of playing to one's potential.

While performing in a competitive situation a player's focus of concentration should be totally on the ball or the skill he is about to perform. The mind should be perfectly clear.

If a player has total concentration while performing, the mind will become "one" with his performance. He or she will not be influenced by outside stimuli. They will have no sense of time. They will not feel any emotion about performance since they will be experiencing total involvement with what they are doing.

This is the state that athletes experience when they say they have played "out of their heads." They are able to experience the ultimate high of concentration while they were

performing. Their conscious self-ego is able to completely let go and let their subconscious computer take over and control their performance.

Fear will never enter the mind of the concentrating performer. When a performer does allow the emotion of fear to enter and control his conscious mind, he usually begins to "choke." Choking occurs when a player becomes afraid that he or she will not perform successfully. They see themselves hitting the ball into the net or missing an important free throw. They start to fear losing. When a performer begins to lose his self-control over the conscious power of concentration and lets fear "hang a noose around their neck," they begin to choke and perform unsuccessfully.

Example: When serving in tennis, for example, a player should first decide into what corner of the court he or she is going to serve. Then focus complete mental attention on making a perfect ball toss. As he or she begins to swing the racket, keep the mind focused on the ball. Following the serve, immediately begin to concentrate on the ball and the opponents return of serve. At no time during that point does the player allow a negative thought or picture to enter the mind. When a player begins to fear the fact that he or she may double fault on an important point during a game, the second ball served for that point will usually be a fault.

Recommendation: After performing a relaxation exercise (see chapter 66), athletes can try a series of different exercises to improve concentration. While performing these exercises, athletes should be aware of when their focus of concentration is interrupted. When this happens, don't get upset or angry. They must relax and let their minds return to their focus of concentration. These exercises won't produce overnight results but will sharpen the mind over time.

1. Say the alphabet to yourself. Mentally picture each letter as you say it.
2. Count from one to one hundred. Mentally picture each number as you say it. Progress to counting to five hundred.
3. Hold a golf ball, tennis ball or baseball in your hand. Find a distinguishing feature on the ball as your concentration such as a letter in the name on the ball, part of a seam, a dimple, etc. Try to concentrate on this feature on the ball for one minute. Progress at your own rate to five minutes.
4. Find a distinguishing feature of some object in the room. Try to concentrate on this feature for one minute, blocking out all peripheral stimuli. Progress at your own rate to five minutes.
5. Close your eyes. Concentrate on your breath as you inhale and exhale for one minute. Progress at your own rate to five minutes
6. Concentrate on the second hand on a wrist watch for one minute. Progress at your own rate to five minutes.