



**The Rugby League
Coach Education Programme**

The Think Coaching E-Link

Issue 15



Welcome to Issue 14 – Mental Skills

Introduction

This issue is given over to the important and often neglected area of Mental Skills. The first article looks at giving you the coach some practical tips and guidelines on how to incorporate this into your training programme.

The second article looks at it from a players view point with Andrew Johns giving you his Mental Skills checklist.



ARTICLE 1

You Only Achieve What You Believe

The stress involved in a Rugby League game can cause players to react both physically and mentally in a manner which can negatively affect their performance. They may become tense, their heart rates race, they break into a cold sweat, they worry about the outcome of the game, they find it hard to concentrate on the task at hand. This has led coaches to take an increasing interest in the field of sport psychology and in particular in the area of stress control. That interest has focused on techniques which players can use in the game situation to maintain control and optimise their performance. Once learned, these techniques allow the player to relax and focus their attention in a positive manner on the task of preparing for and participation in the game.

Relaxation Training

There are a number of relaxation techniques which have the following characteristics:

- procedures for first recognising and then releasing tension in muscles
- concentration of breathing control and regulation
- concentration of sensations such as heaviness, warmth
- mental imagery

Regardless of which technique is used, the following two conditions need to exist if the technique is to be learned:

- the player must believe that relaxation will help
- a quiet, dimly lit and warm room which is free from interruption

Meditation for Relaxation

A number of sports psychologists believe that meditation can be useful in achieving maximum performance from a player. Engaging in meditation helps reduce stress before an event and with experience the player can learn to relax different muscle groups and appreciate subtle differences in muscle tension.

The technique includes the following steps:

- Lie down quietly on your back in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
- Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing to your face.
- Breathe through your nose and become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say the word "one" silently to yourself. For example, breathe in...out, "one"; in...out, "one"; and so on. Continue for 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm. When you finish, lie quietly for several minutes at first with closed eyes and later with opened eyes. Maintain a passive attitude, permit relaxation to occur at its own pace and expect other thoughts. When distracting thoughts occur return your concentration back to your breathing. Try to practice the technique once a day.

How Do I Achieve Relaxed Muscles?

Progressive muscular relaxation involves the active contracting and relaxing of muscles. When a muscle is tightened for 4-6 seconds and then relaxed, the muscle returns to a more relaxed state. This process should be performed for the following parts of the body starting from the feet and progressively working up, legs, thighs, buttocks, stomach, back, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, jaw, face and eyes.

How Will Relaxed Muscles Feel?

In the 1930's it was noticed that patients in a relaxed state experienced one of two sensations: the feeling of warmth or the feeling of heaviness in completely relaxed limbs. During the relaxation process concentration should be focused on one of these sensations. For the first few sessions the player should alternate the focus between sessions to determine which one they prefer.

Can Relaxation Have a Negative Effect?

In competition situation a player will either be:

- **Under-excited**; low in arousal; find it hard to "get up" for the game; disinterested; etc
- **Over-excited**; high in arousal; over the top; nervous-anxious; scared of the competition; sick with worry.
- **Optimally-excited**; nervous but in control; looking forward to the game but apprehensive; thinking positively; feeling good; etc.

If we were to use relaxation procedures with an over excited player, we might be able to reduce their arousal level to that of the optimally excited player. This would have a positive effect on performance. However if we asked an under-excited player to use relaxation procedures it would only make it harder to "get-up" for the competition. Coaches therefore have to know their players and how they react in game situations.

What is Mental Imagery?

Mental imagery involves the player imagining themselves in a specific environment or performing a specific activity. These images should have the player performing these items very well and successfully. They should see themselves enjoying the activity and feeling satisfied with their performance. They should attempt to enter fully into the image with all their senses. See, hear, feel, touch, smell and perform as they would like to perform in real life. A player in a fully relaxed state, is particularly receptive to mental imagery.

What Can Mental Imagery Be Used For?

Mental Imagery can be used:

- **To see success.** Many players "see" themselves achieving their goals on a regular basis, both performing skills at a high level and seeing the desired performance outcomes.
- **To motivate.** Before or during training sessions, calling up images of your goals for that session, or of a past or future competition or opposition player can serve a motivational purpose. It can vividly remind you of your objective, which can result in increased intensity in training.
- **To perfect skills.** Mental imagery is often used to facilitate the learning and refinement of skills or skill sequences. The best players "see" and "feel" themselves performing perfect skills, programs, routines, or plays on a very regular basis.
- **To familiarise.** Mental imagery can be effectively used to familiarize yourself with all kinds of things, such as a football ground or stadium, a complex play or routine, a pre-game plan, a game plan, a media interview plan, a refocusing plan or the strategy you plan to follow.
- **To set the stage for performance.** Mental imagery is often an integral part of the pre-game plan, which helps set the mental stage for a good performance. Players do a complete mental run through of the key elements of their performance. This helps draw out their desired pre-game feeling and focus. It also helps keep negative thoughts from interfering with a positive pre-game focus.
- **To focus.** Mental imagery can be useful in helping you to re-focus when the need arises. For example, if a warm up is feeling sluggish, imagery of a previous best performance or previous best game focus can help get things back on track. You can also use imagery as a means of refocusing within the game by imagining what you should focus on and feeling that focus.

How Do I Apply Mental Imagery?

Golfing great Jack Nicklaus used mental imagery. In describing how he images his performance, he wrote:

"I never hit a shot even in practice without having a sharp in-focus picture of it in my head. It's like a colour movie. First, I "see" the ball where I want to finish, nice and white and sitting up high on

the bright green grass. Then the scene quickly changes, and I “see” the ball going there: its path, trajectory, and shape, even its behaviour on landing. Then there’s a sort of fadeout, and the next scene shows me making the kind of swing that will turn the previous images into reality. Only at the end of this short private Hollywood spectacular do I select a club and step up to the ball.”

When Should Mental Imagery Be Used?

To become highly proficient at the constructive use of imagery, you have to use it every day, on your way to training, during training, after training, and in the evenings before sleeping. If you want to perfect and use mental imagery to your fullest advantage you can start by doing two things. In every training session, before you execute any skill or combination of skills, first do it in imagery as perfectly and precisely as possible.

See, feel, and experience yourself moving through the sections in your mind as you would like them actually to unfold. In competitions, before the game starts, mentally recall the game plan, significant plays, skills, movements, reactions, or feelings that you want to carry into the event.

What Are The Benefits?

Relaxation itself can be useful in a number of circumstances including:

- the promotion of rest, recovery and recuperation
- the removal of stress related reactions, e.g. increased muscular tension, etc
- the establishing of a physical and mental state has an increased receptivity to positive mental imagery
- the establishing of a set level of physical and mental arousal prior to warming up for competition.

When combined with positive mental imagery it is useful in:

- developing self-confidence
- developing pre-competition and competition strategies which teach players to cope with new situations before they actually encounter them
- helping the players to focus attention or concentrate on a particular skill that is being learnt or developed. This can take place both in or away from the training session
- the game situation



Andrew Johns' Check List

MENTAL SKILLS

1. SACRIFICE / PRIORITISING

The player must get his priorities right and be prepared to sacrifice lower priorities for football; football must be number 1.

2. DEDICATION / COMMITMENT

The player must have a vision/dream and commit to the goals to get there.

3. PROFESSIONALISM

The player must approach his football with the highest level of professionalism, both on and off the field; attention to detail is paramount; constantly searching for the next 'edge' or the next break though is critical.

4. MENTAL TOUGHNESS

The player must develop the ability/confidence to produce the highest quality processes/skills under extreme pressure; this has to happen through the training process.

5. CONCENTRATION

The player must be able to narrow in and block out distractions under pressure in a game.

6. LIFE BALANCE

The player must establish a solid/consistent platform in their off field life before they will be able to reach their potential on the field, the two go hand in hand.

7. SWITCH ON / SWITCH OFF

The player must develop the capacity to switch on 100% for training/playing and not waste a single opportunity to be the best, and yet have ways to switch off/relax after training/playing in order to recover and get a mental break, it is a disadvantage to try to be switched on to football matters 24 hour a day, seven days a week.

8. TAKING THE EXTRA STEP

The player must always seize the opportunity to take the next step, always be first to training, last to leave, always look to do more than the people around you.

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