



Imagery

“Everything happens twice. First it happens in your mind...then it happens in real life. Choose how you want it to play out in your mind.” - Harvey Dorfman

Have you ever finished a presentation or performed in a competition and walked away thinking if only you had the opportunity to redo it that you'd perform much better? Welcome to imagery - also known as visualization. Imagery is the action of doing something in your mind before it actually happens. We often do it without thinking about it and sometimes in the negative sense, 'This is not going to go well for me.' That is negative anticipation and opens the door to the mind conjuring up all the things that could go wrong while at the same time losing sight of what it is that you need to focus on to be successful.

BENEFITS AND USES OF IMAGERY: It works in the opposite way too. Research in the field of Performance Psychology has shown that positive and intentional (doing it with purpose) mental imagery leads to increases in athletic performance. It is used by elite athletes regularly to visualize success, to build confidence before competition by visualizing their past greatest moments, to slow the game down, to manipulate situations, to mentally rehearse routines, to see oneself recover from mistakes properly, and to feel out mechanics and technique from different perspectives, to name a few uses.

WHAT IS IT? Imagery is mental rehearsal of a past or future event and involves all the senses. For example, when you close your eyes you can feel yourself walking to the plate or the mound. You can feel your cleats dig in. You can see your opponent and feel the heat of the sun on your face. You can grip the ball or the bat with different intensities and feel the rhythm of the game. You can feel your release point or point of contact. All this can be felt from the comfort of your own mind. But it's not always comfortable. At times, it can be more exhausting than actually performing. Pretty incredible, huh? Interestingly, the mind cannot tell the difference between real and imagined experiences so the only difference between the two experiences (real and imagined) is the physical exertion of actually performing.

HOW DOES IMAGERY WORK? Think of imagery like going on a hike. Every time someone goes on a hike they reinforce that trail. Likewise, every time you imagine yourself performing you reinforce those brain circuit pathways. That is why it is crucial to spend most of your imagery time performing successfully rather than unsuccessfully. What you imagine repeatedly becomes stronger wired in your brain.

What about bad habits? Well, what happens when people stop hiking a trail and reinforcing the path with footsteps? Sure enough, the trail grows weeds and falls right back into the scenery. The same occurs with bad habits. Eventually, they disappear as new brain pathways are cleared and repeatedly traveled on.

WHEN CAN I DO IT? You can perform imagery whenever you want. When you're healthy, when you're injured. When you're a starter, when you're a bench player. Any time of day and seven days a week. The more you imagine yourself performing confidently the way you want to perform – the more likely you are to transfer that into games and practice.

WHY SHOULD YOU USE IT? One of the main reasons you should use imagery is that it's been shown to be effective in increasing performance. The next reason is...hardly any athletes use it intentionally! If you are trying to find ways to separate yourself from the competition and desire to perform near your peak consistently, then *why wouldn't you use it?*

There is a saying, "seeing is believing." Well, what if you never see what you want to see? You are left in unbelief. Challenge yourself to take it a step further by making the statement, "believing is seeing." The first statement (seeing is believing) says "I'll believe it *when* I see it." While the second statement (Believing is seeing) says, "I'll believe it *then* I'll see it." This second statement is the mature outlook and is the foundation for which an athlete builds confidence before he or she ever goes out to perform. It's the expectation of success before experiencing success. What happens to the athlete who relies on success to breed confidence if success never comes? Exactly. No confidence.

Finally, the difference between watching a highlight reel of your greatest performances on screen and visualizing them can be compared to watching a movie versus reading a book. Watching a movie only asks that you receive information whereas reading requires active participation, focus, devotion, and attention. The brain is stimulated more when you have to work. Imagery allows you to design all the details and experience. And like any other skill, you can get better at it as you practice. It may start out fuzzy but soon enough you'll be seeing yourself dominating performance in HD!

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR CAREER: Take at least 5 minutes a day to imagine exactly how you want to perform physically (look) and mentally (feel) and use the following details to assist you.

Personal Highlight Reel of Top 5 moments in sport or life: (use these before a game/practice to gain confidence to compete in the right mindset).

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____