



SPORT EDUCATION

Unlock the Power of Your Mind

Chapter II - MENTAL IMAGERY

Mental imagery, popularly referred to as visualization, is the process of using all your senses to help with learning and developing new sports skills and strategies as well as visualization success. Imagining optimal performance is accomplished by creating or re-creating the whole or part of a sporting event. This type of mental rehearsal can be likened to learning a physical skill. The more you **deliberately** practice, the better you will become at the actual task. Thus, imagery goes far beyond daydreaming. As with physical practice, mental practice requires structure and discipline for you to reap its benefits.

Sources of experimental studies have explored the effects of mental imagery on physical performance. Findings demonstrated that imagery is one of the most powerful performance weapons we have in our mental arsenal.

Although imagery will not guarantee that you will always reach best times or win the race, mastery of this mental skill will increase the probability of success in sports. Specifically, imagery works to enhance one's performance by sharpening the mental blueprint and strengthening the muscle memory for the physical purpose at hand. This is why imagery is used by virtually all Champion athletes as a **critical** part of their training regiments. Imagery can be used to prepare for all athletic performances regardless of the mental skills involved.

The brain does not always differentiate between real and virtually imaged experiences because the same systems in the brain are deployed for both types of experiences. For example, a common nightmare is that of being pursued. The dreamer is safely at home in bed, yet the dreamer experiences the physical sensations that would accompany a real, waking pursuit.

Visualize positive performances and picture the ideal steps for achieving the successful result. Create a crystal-clear mental image and powerful physical feeling of what you want to accomplish. Include the sights, sounds, smells, tactile impressions, and powerful emotions that accompany the total performance experience while in your virtual arena. The clarity and controllability of your images will improve with practice.

When visualizing, strive to experience the action in 3-D from the first-person perspective (through your own eyes,) as opposed to a third-person point of view (through the eyes of the spectator.) The aim during imagery rehearsal is to:

- **See it**
- **Feel it**
- **Enjoy it.**

You experience yourself having achieved your goal through your own eyes, rather than watching yourself from the outside.

Here are three key ingredients for successful imagery rehearsal:

1. Vividly *see* yourself performing successfully
2. Deeply *feel* yourself performing successfully
3. Thoroughly *enjoy* seeing and feeling yourself winning.



As an example, a veteran NFL punter developed a form of weight training for the mind. For 10 minutes every other day, he gets in a relaxed state through deep breathing, and then, he “sees and feels” himself executing successful punts in a variety of worst-case scenarios. He uses imagery as a mental walk-through to pre-experience flawless performances and expertly handling any adversity that might arise. He was also familiar with the stadiums on his schedule, so he was able to picture himself there, playing in his next game.

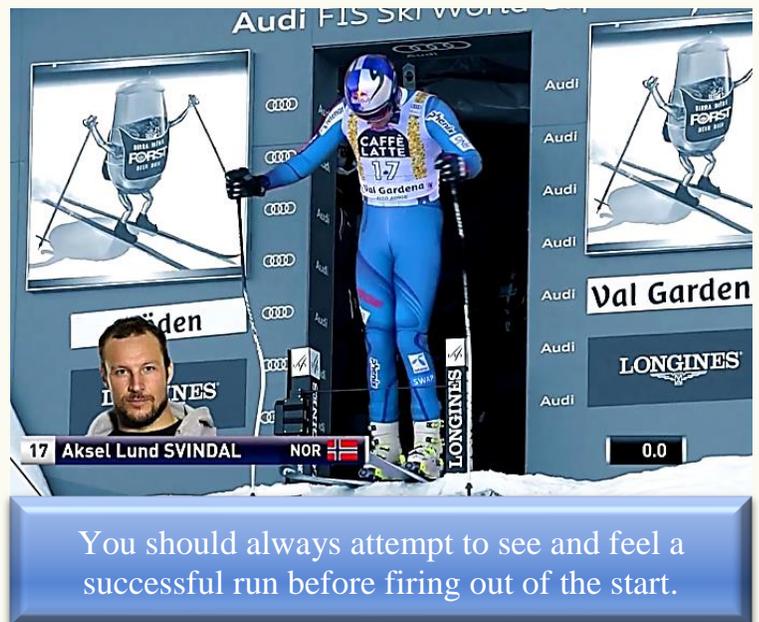
Canadian Duff Gibson, the gold medalist in the skeleton at the Turin Winter Games in 2006, described how he used visualization to attain peak performance.

In the sport of skeleton, visualization is key. When you're sliding down an ice run faster than a car goes down the freeway, to be successful and for your own safety, you need to be completely focused and in the moment. Visualization, like anything, gets better with practice, and ultimately, I was able to use the skill to prepare for the sequence of turns on a given track as well as to gain any focus for what I was about to do. Through visualization, I also trained myself to be very relaxed on the sled, which is critical to generating speed.

Can you see how this can apply to ski racing?

Mentally practice two or three times each week for about 10 to 15 minutes per rehearsal. Select a specific sports skill to further develop, or work your way through different scenarios, incorporating various game-ending or race situations. (As you might assume, these mental skills and techniques can be used for any sport.)

Mental practice sessions that are shorter in length are also beneficial. Good times include during any downtime in your schedule, the night before a competition, as an element of your prerace/prgame routine, and especially as part of the prerace/prgame routine. (In ski racing, this could be just before you move into the start house. You should always attempt to see and feel a successful run before firing out of the start.)



Let's conclude our discussion with a mental practice exercise. Sit up in a chair with your back straight (rather than lying down on a bed or on the floor, as this can make you sleepy.) Let your eyes close and become aware of your breathing. Take a few slow, deep breaths (in through the nose and out through the mouth) to clear your mind and relax your body. Select a specific skill in your sport.

Begin by creating a mental picture of your environment, progressively including all the sights and sounds. Pay particular attention to the physical sensations in your body, such as the spring in your ankles and knees, whether your breathing is heavy or relaxed, the weight of the ski poles in your hand and their feel on the snow.

As you mentally start to go through your prerace routine – inhale deeply and let the breath go through your body. Now, fully *see, feel, and enjoy* executing this skill throughout each moment of the movement. Maintain full attention throughout the entire activity and complete the routine by sinking the basket with a swish, serving an ace down the line, or staying forward as you carve the perfect turn while staying on your line.

Challenge yourself to do this exercise successfully three times in a row with full focus and a positive result. If you visualize missing the basket, hitting the ball into the net, being thrown into the backseat of your skis, or if you lose focus, keep repeating the process until you can visualize yourself doing it right straight through. This will further anchor your physical self to a gold medal performance.

Winning has nothing to do with racing.
Most days don't have races anyway.
Winning is about struggle and effort and optimism, and...
never, ever, ever giving up.