

A sample chapter from:

Closing the Gap

Applied Sport Psychology for High School

By David L. Rockwood

(For the complete book see www.SportPsychSchool.com)



To my grandparents for the gift of heritage,
To my parents for the gifts of work and education,
And to my four girls for the gift of love.

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Chapter

8

Focus



Maintaining good focus can be the difference between success and disaster.

Chapter 8: Focus



Carl Lewis, American sprinter and long-jumper

Carl Lewis is one of the most decorated Olympians of all time. Over the course of his 4 Olympic appearances, Lewis won an incredible 10 medals (8 of which were gold) in the sprints and the long jump. About his mental preparation for competition he said:

“My thoughts before a big race are usually pretty simple. I tell myself: Get out of the blocks, run your race, stay relaxed. If you run your race, you'll win... channel your energy. Focus.”

-Carl Lewis

What is Focus?

Focus is everything! It is the most important mental skill.

If you can master your focus you will avoid almost all of the potential psychological problems that athletes face. The list of possible consequences for losing focus includes:

- Choking
- Performing below your ability level
- Experiencing fear, panic, or anxiety
- Getting “psyched out”

In fact, focus is so important that we will spend the next four chapters on different aspects of it.

But, what is focus?

Focus is concentration, paying attention to one thing, not being distracted.

You must be able to maintain a state of focused concentration for the duration of the competition. If your sport lasts 10 seconds, then you must be able

to fully focus on one thing for 10 seconds. If your sport lasts 90 minutes, or even 3 hours, then you must be able to maintain your focus for that length of time.

Being focused means that you are able to become totally absorbed in what you are doing, blocking out all other distractions.

Some of you might be saying to yourself, “What if I have ADD?” Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is fairly common. It causes you to become easily distracted. However, you can’t use this as an excuse. One of the hallmarks of ADD/ADHD is the ability to “hyper-focus” on a single task and totally ignore all other things. For example, think about a child with ADD playing a video game. She can play for hours on end without looking away from the screen, without being distracted by anything. Her focus is absolute. Even with ADD, you can be a great focuser. Saying you have ADD is not an excuse.



You may have noticed that this is a pretty short chapter. That is because we will spend the next four chapters on different aspects of focus. In this chapter, we will introduce the basic components of good focus. There are two:

- (1) The Right Time
- (2) The Right Place.

These two components are like the latitude and longitude of good focus. Think of a GPS device. Knowing the latitude and longitude allows you to “zero in” to any location on the planet. Similarly, these two elements of focus allow you to zero in on good focus.



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The Right Time



Keep your mind in the NOW

During the competition your mind must only exist in the present. You must ignore the past and ignore the future. If you make a mistake, you must be able to totally forget it and focus fully in the next moment. If you are still thinking about a past mistake then you are in a state of distraction and will make more mistakes. The same is true about a past success. After a great play, forget it and stay focused on the NOW. Dwelling on a past play distracts you from playing well now.

If you are thinking about winning or losing, you are thinking in the future, not the now. You must not think about winning or losing. Keep your mind in the present. We sometimes call this a “moment-to-moment focus.”

Think of it like running in a race. Once the gun has fired and the race had begun, it is now in the past. You need to forget whatever happened and keep your mind in the current moment, the current step you are on right this instant. You should not be thinking about what will happen at some future moment of the race. Your mind should remain focused in the step that you are on.



In a nutshell, the key ideas for “the right time” are:

Stay in the PRESENT.

Stay in the MOMENT.

Stay in the NOW.

The Right Place

The second key element of good focus is to keep your mind in the right place. It must remain fully focused on the HERE. The lines that enclose your court or field are the boundaries to your universe. Nothing else in the world exists. During the competition you must ignore the crowd, your boy/girlfriend, school, work, family, and school.



This means that you must control your eyes and ears. You need to know what distracts you the most. If you are easily distracted by sounds, then you should put extra effort into controlling what you allow yourself to listen to. If you are easily distracted by sights, then you should put extra effort into controlling what you allow yourself to look at. If you know that you are easily distracted, you can plan a strategy ahead of time. What will you keep your eyes on? What will you keep your ears on?

Keep your mind in the HERE

In a nutshell the key idea for “the right place” is:

Stay in the HERE.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line is simple:

Stay in the HERE and NOW!

Getting “psyched-out” is the result of poor focus—thinking too much about your opponents and not about the task at hand. There are certain things that you need to be aware of about your opponent, but don’t focus on any more than that. For example, you should not be thinking about your opponent’s rank. It is an irrelevant detail that will only distract you from what you *should* be focused on.

Exercises to Improve Your Focus

Like any other skill, focus will improve with practice. There are many drills and exercises that you can do that will improve your focusing ability. They will only work, however, after consistent practice. As you read through the different drills, find a few that you think will work for you and practice them every day. You will soon find your focusing skills improving.

Drills for when you are not in your performance setting:

1. When listening to someone speak, (like in class), try to clear your mind of everything and connect fully with what the person is saying. Do this for short periods, then gradually increase the time.
2. Work on holding your focus on something (looking at an object or listening to a sound) for short periods, then gradually increase the time.
3. Practice fully focusing while other people watch or talk around you, like while reading, studying, hammering, etc. Relax, then fully focus.
4. Scan the page in front of you now, pick the last 3 words in this sentence and focus on them. Focus until they stand out more than anything else on the page. Back up your focus to become aware of the whole sentence. Zero in on the word “focus.” You can do this with any book, any time.
5. See how it feels to focus on different kinds of thoughts or feelings. Go on a run and as you extend your legs think “stretch” or “float.” Do it 10 times in a row. See what happens. Then, think “power” when your left foot hits the ground, then the right foot. Do it 10 times. See what happens.
6. Do a body scan. Focus on the sensations in a part of your body.
7. Look at something and fully focus on it. Get absorbed in it.
8. Line up several objects. Focus on all of them. Then zero in on one, then on its center, then on the center of the center. Let everything else blur.
9. Focus on a specific positive thought, repeat it, stop thinking, then refocus on it.

Drills for when you are in your performance setting:

10. When practicing, focus on being totally connected to your moves.
11. Relax, imagine the perfect execution of the skill, then do it.
12. Seek the feel of movement, if it feels right, all will be right.
13. Try to recreate the mental and physical conditions that led to past successes.
14. When you feel stressed, slow everything down (walking, breathing, talking, stretching, etc.)
15. When distracted, clear distractions by thinking about the little things you have to do, the technical aspects of your sport.
16. After an error, breathe, clear your mind, shift your focus onto what you need to do next. Get good at this. Stay in the NOW.
17. Focus on the moment—one shot, one stroke, one step, etc.
18. Use simple reminders (“focus”, “smooth”, “relax”, etc.).
19. Embrace the joy of the sport.
20. Feel free to execute moves without evaluation. Just let go. Go by instinct.
21. If your sport requires an awareness of other players or opponents, practice being totally aware of everything, then focusing in to your target.
22. If there are problems, relax the body, relax the focus, try without forcing it.

Tips to regain your focus (more about this in the next chapter):

23. Return to the basics, follow the game plan.
24. Focus only on the target or the step right in front you.
25. Reassure yourself that you are trained and ready.
26. Remember that your goals are realistic.
27. Focus on what is going right, not what is going wrong.
28. Imagine the skill perfectly.
29. Focus on little steps.
30. After the performance, analyze what went well and what needs to improve.
31. It should be enjoyable, embrace the joy. If you hate it, consider leaving it.