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MENTAL TRAINING: NERVES AND ANXIETY

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Many sports not only require physical skills, but a strong mental game as well. Most coaches believe that sports are 90% mental and only 10% physical. Especially in sports where hundredths of a second or tenths of an inch separate the champions from the mediocre athletes, an extra edge can be extremely crucial. Hence, numerous athletes are turning towards mental imagery to take their game to the next level. Different uses of imagery in sport include: mental practice of specific performance skills, improving confidence and positive thinking, problem solving, controlling arousal and anxiety, performance review and analysis, preparation for performance, and maintaining mental freshness during injury (Porter & Foster, 1990). This article focuses on controlling arousal and anxiety.

NERVES AND ANXIETY

Many people get extremely nervous about entering races or competitions and may even avoid racing all together because the anxiety is so completely overwhelming. I see nerves as an advantage, however. If you are the type of person who gets ill at the thought of an upcoming race this means that you hold a lot of pressure on yourself to do well and the race itself is a very significant event for you. This means that your performance is important to you. You need to redirect all of the passion and energy that you feel as nerves and anxiety into a positive direction and use it as an advantage for yourself on race day. The following Mental Relaxation Techniques change your focus of attention and can aid you in reducing tension and anxiety.

BREATHING TECHNIQUES

These techniques require practice since breathing properly is a skill that you must learn, but practice can take place at any time.

Complete Breathing: The advantage of complete breathing is that you can achieve momentary relaxation with one breath. One or two breaths immediately before a game or event can have a calming effect on your mental state.

1. Imagine your lungs as being divided into three levels: lower, middle, and upper.
2. When you start to inhale, focus on filling the lower level with air by pushing your diaphragm down and your stomach out.
3. In continuing inhalation, fill the middle level by expanding your chest cavity and raising your rib cage.
4. Fill the upper level by raising your chest and shoulders slightly
5. Hold the inhalation for 3-5 seconds.
6. Force all the air out of your lungs in this exhalation and 'let go' of all the muscular tension in your chest and abdomen.

Rhythmic Breathing: Rhythmic breathing is a slightly more sophisticated version of complete breathing in that you coordinate breathing patterns with a measured, external count. In this method you slowly count to four as you inhale, count to four as you hold



FITNESS ADVENTURES



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it to four as you exhale and then count to four as you hold the

Ratio Breathing: This technique requires an inhale/exhale ratio of 1:2. If you count to four as you inhale, you count to eight as you exhale. This method requires a deep, full breath at the start and it forces you to be more conscious of controlling your exhalations and inhalations.

VISUALIZATION

From Tao of Sports

"In a relaxed state, recall a time when you felt confident of your ability to perform. This may have been in a practice session or during the "heat" of competition. Feel a sense of oneness with your sport; your play is a natural extension of the greatness within you. Feel the exhilaration and satisfaction of perfect execution.

Take this feeling and pair it with an anchor, such as the circle formed by pressing your index finger and thumb together. This is your reference point for the feeling of confident play. Use it during moments when your confidence wanes.

Now, with anchor in place, imagine yourself just prior to an upcoming performance. See yourself calm and confident. Enter the arena of play, and perform exactly the way you know you can. This is the state of being truly confident in your ability to perform well-under any circumstance."

Try practicing visualization or breathing techniques once a day if you find nerves and anxiety are obstacles to your performance. Adding daily mental training to your physical training program will help you reach the next level in your sport!

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