

MENTAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN TRAINING

Concentration and focus: a skill, an art and a science

Terry Orlick, in his excellent book, Pursuit of Excellence, described how athletes focus.

Many an author and speaker has stated similar comment to his that ‘...best performances occur when an athlete is totally connected / riveted to their performance so as to be on autopilot, even robotic’.

As a bowler or one coaching an elite bowler, you must discover what focus works for you and in what circumstances.

In bowls it may mean tuning into your body, the lunge forward, the knee bending, hand outstretched, smooth gazelle like step forward rising like the phoenix to watch the bowl bound for glory.

Of being aware of the key feelings that accompany your exhilarating body moves when the delivery is executed flawlessly - that is really when you are tuned in to know those senses; ...the practice and training of focusing for bowls involves stringent learning to stay connected to what you are doing, to your body and its feelings.

It could be to improve your capability to focus, you should train by use of these guidelines:

- Feel the execution of the delivery, (mental) imagine your delivery then naturally execute the shot.
- Train by being totally connected to your body movement when bowling.
- Be aware of everything via your peripheral vision, then blinker your visual focus.
- Try to recreate the mental / physical condition to experience the feelings of your ‘pb’.
- Use cues / red alerts as some form of aid so as to enter or re-enter that focused state; a red alert is like the red light signal in your mind prompting you when straying.
- Practice the length of time of that focus (pre delivery, delivery, follow through actions) to have your focus and attention span stay for a longer period through this training.

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Your goal as a bowler, and especially an elite bowler, is to deliver the perfect (weighted) bowl requiring you to focus totally on the entire grass line pathway.

So in this focus state you could be in any given green in the world as each delivery is a separate perfect process where focus / concentration is for the short but intense period of the delivery movement.

The time in between deliveries should always be one for relaxation. A time where tension in both muscular and mental is removed or reduced to enable the preparation for the next delivery, a delivery that is to be perfectly executed.

All elite athletes / bowlers are human and affected by worry, distractors, loss of focus or results oriented concern.

It is important for bowlers to understand that what we seek is a relaxed focus, i.e. not lacking in intensity, more about the mind being trained to be cleared of irrelevancies, distractions and tensions. The focus is centred or blinkered; zoning in on the location of importance for execution of the bowling delivery.

Focus and concentration are part of your mental skill inventory and that requires training so try examples such as:

- Clock in a microwave – turn it on for 20 seconds and watch that clock constantly for the 20 seconds; now the same for 60 seconds.
- Sit quietly, let yourself relax and focus on something for a set period.
- And sit now listen totally to something – a bird, heartbeat.
- Peripheral vs. specific – line up a few objects soaking up each, then all, then begin to narrow the focus onto one object (use the room you are in now while reading).
- Thought selection – focus on a set thought then allow mind to wander then refocus on specific target (if you are like me having a wandering mind should not be too difficult).
- Seek the feel (sensory) which for me is the term ‘soft hands’, if the feel is right the bowl will end in the zone (where I am asking players how does it feel).
- Training – voice how it feels, close the eyes to sense the feel; one of the young gun bowlers from Wales told me of his approach of watching the first bowl, then eyes closed for the delivery of the rest.
- When feeling stressed (e.g. proceeding toward losing the game mid-way through the event) slow down, see and sense the calming feeling, talk more, stretch, breath slowly.

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- Upon making an error in training stop, shift your focus to what you will do well for the next execution (obviously if the error is repetitive, retrieve and execute correctly as this is the training session purpose).
- Use cues that mean something to you – examples I am aware of for two players are the expressions ‘soft hands’ and ‘009’, which for these two people mean senses and enjoyment.
- Enjoy – and if not leave it this time to return at another time.
- The worlds best achieve their best results when they focus only on their performance process and not on the result outcome.
- Remind yourself of your training quality.
- Debrief every event and performance evaluation record.

In their excellent book on bowls, de Lacy and Belliss say ‘...you can improve focus through practice’.

No, the only way to improve focus is to train yourself to acquire this skill and practice it.

Similarly, concentration can be learnt as an acquired skill.

And the way it is done is via organized training under coach supervision.

Salter in his bowls book also wrote about Focus. He wrote ‘..Although events may be beyond your control, reactions to events are entirely controlled by you. Develop a focus plan, practice it when in training and when distracted’

Simulating the anticipated distraction as part of the training session is the best method of learning to cope as it is called relevant experience.

Focus requirements can be enhanced easily in lawn bowls as every position in the team requires attention to focus on different skills and roles and therein different cues. In my experience as head coach with elite / national squads, I explored this in two ways:

Job descriptions for every playing position,

Game plans of a generic nature and for each event format.

These were easy to detail and need not be exhaustive. If there is too much information the player loses a degree of autonomy, which is self defeating.

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Every year since 2006, that is 12 years now, I revise those earlier player position descriptions to be specific to the new approach to bowling and also the varied event formats.

We hear bowls like most elite level sport is 90 % between the ears (or above the shoulders). I often invoke the phrase...thinking hard or hardly thinking (which I have seen written in volleyball and squash coaching journals) but if it is 90% of the game of lawn bowls, lets see the serious bowlers and their coach spend ample time training to perfect that 'above shoulder' skill.

Lachlan Tighe, 2018