

MENTAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN TRAINING

Imagery

Imagery as a mental skill and tool is a concept foreign to bowls and bowlers and even if it is referred to in some (elite) bowls circles is rarely talked about, understood or used in lawn bowls for developing players.

Using mental imagery opens up numerous situations for bowlers.

I giggle at some bowlers imagination when I have shared the same green with them in a competition but wonder who is on which 'grass' when the stories are retold of the day of competition.

Simply some of us already have vivid imagination (go to any bowls club to verify the levels of imagination) so why not use it, not to embellish 'truth and performance' but to prepare you for the big day.

So often I have read where the best athletes in the world of sport are users of mental imagery. It is used daily as a way of directing training and preparing for the competition.

Imagery can allow you to draw on all your senses (hearing, sight, sound etc) to experience the moment in competition, including coping with bad moments.

Not only can you use it for 'pb' but for coping when 'worst nightmares' befall your imagery. And for that matter recalling the image of the 'pb' is invaluable if actual physical training time has been limited.

What imagery should do when functioning is mentally program a positive performance mentally to allow your body to follow suit. It should enhance self-confidence knowing you had a recall of a 'pb' performance.

Sounds good, sounds simple, but how do I develop it?

Like all the other skills by starting the process, training, applying, programming, acquiring, assessing, repeating the competency to get to each new level.

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However, right now you are saying to yourself, heck what do I do – my ideal world has you accessing a coach who knows about this technique or you access a coach who accesses a sports psychologist, who then conducts training in this mental skill.

This is what Innovation is for me as a coach.

Either a coach with the skill, or, another sports science specialist who helps the bowler take you as far as you can imagine you want to go in the competitive aspect of the sport.

But back to the simple things in application of imagery. It could be you image the club / green you train at so imagine...what does it look like, picture it, now smell it and what comes to your nostrils, and now that feeling as you walk in the gates or even when walking up and down a rink on the playing surface, what you always do in a warm up (nothing !!!) , the feel when you touch the bowl.

I use to say to some bowlers, especially one of the national team ladies, you should love your bowl, you should know its every feature as it delivers all your success and fulfills your dreams; or a mat that is there at the club.

Now extend that to sense the image of your actual training.

Experts tend to write that we should try and practice quality imagery for up to 15 minutes every day. If you are just starting this process, lead in gradually - go three minutes daily for a month, five minutes the next month, so within 3-4 months you are at their 15 minute level.

One way of feeling as if this training has practical application is to do the relevant bowl delivery action, either with eyes closed, in front of a mirror, or on a sunny day out in the backyard or on the bowls green, placing yourself so the shadow cast by the sun is likened to a mirror.

You are trying to experience the image(ry) using all the senses so imagery as a tool and skill is beyond the use of sight only. As you train for this skill and progress in your level of learning you may find it helpful to observe others, either those who are perfect technicians or even those bowls with defective delivery techniques.

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Next time at the green after your own progress in imagery skill watch a person on your rink for transfer of image. Generally if it is a very good technique you could even try to feel yourself doing it exactly as they are performing the delivery.

It is recognized that there are athletes so capable of imagery skill, they are able to evaluate their performance and pin point the area in need of improvement.

It seems they do this by replaying the competition just pre and during so as to identify the focus when it was ...all happening, identify the distraction that caused the loss in focus and the time and timing of that in the event.

What this leads to is an important evaluation of how you are thinking in phases of the competition and thus training to perfect and overcome that time span of focus tune out.

Mental imagery can allow you to pre- practice for the event so as to enter a competition with the feeling that I've been here before, this is familiar, this is comfortable, this I can handle.

For instance, I once coached a young female bowler who being an athletic tall younger and talented bowler was into fitness (and other active sport). We talked about her extension of arms, legs, body and we agreed that her self image is aptly described as ...Tai Chi...for us that sensory image of people gracefully, fluid, slowly extending their arms connected to their body – guess what that graceful movement for her encompassed: a sense of relaxation, a truly apt image to transfer into her 'portrait of herself as a bowler'.

Interestingly I used to describe another female bowler as the artist – all grace, lithe of limb and fluent in motion. And one other as 'graceful'. I wanted them all to imagine themselves as bowlers.

I recall one session conducted at the venue for a player held in preparation the day before the State titles, and I had the club skipper join us whereupon we prepared a training session on rink Five with a particular scenario in mind. The next day in the title event on that very rink that exact scenario became a reality.

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After the game and a win, the bowler came to me as he coach and said excitedly ‘...did you see what I did in that end, it was the same set up as yesterday?’

She recalled the image, the recall of the training, the application and not unsurprisingly the outcome she knew was liable to occur – bingo 3 shots to her, thank you very much.

Likewise we did driving practice on the Saturday and next day in the final that situation arose, she did a memory recall, imagining that successful drive training drill, and the outcome was not an unexpected one for either of us.

John Snell did something akin to this imagery in winning his section of the Australian Indoor event this month in 2018. No wonder he remains a legend of the sport despite his age.

In preparing for a BIG event you can imagine yourself at the competition saying positive things to yourself, relaxing and knowing how you relax, overcoming and contending (generally) with the obstacles.

For all these exemplary tales of success, don’t assume everything will always turn out well.

One situation in a pairs national event one of the players turned and sought me out on the bank and said ‘...its not fair coach’ with four ends to play in the event and only three shots off the pace. The player was struggling to cope with the wet and windy, thus unreliable conditions.

If that player had stuck to the task and imagined previous success on wet days of play, they may have persisted and won as the opposition duly dropped four shots in the final two ends of play.

Suffice to say my player imagined all the worst things that can happen. Ah well, can’t be a winning coach every time, just one on a learning curve, always.

Lachlan Tighe, 2018