

Focus

Athletes are often told by coaches to focus, but are seldom told what that means or how to do it. Focusing is the process of paying attention to the performance cues that are directly relevant for the successful completion of a task. In any performance environment, there are numerous things that can capture an athlete's attention. Successful performers learn to selectively attend to those cues that enhance performance and by doing so avoid many of the internal and external distractions that interfere with performance.

Focusing also requires a here and now mentality. Successful performers live in the present. We drive our cars best when we look out the windshield rather than the rearview mirror. Also, when we watch the road immediately in front of us rather than miles ahead. During competition, take each possession, point, race, or stroke one at a time since that is the only time you have control over. Choose to be present!

Our own thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations can be some of the most distracting aspects of athletic performance. Learning to quiet the mind, relax the body, and embrace the physical discomfort is necessary for high level performance. Mindful engagement is the ultimate goal of focus.



Improve Your Focus

1. **Focus on your breathing:** This brings you immediately into the present moment. With practice, it relaxes the body, calms the mind, and re-centers you.
2. **Use the thought-stopping technique:** When you catch yourself overthinking, dwelling on the past, or worrying about the future, emphatically tell yourself to “STOP!” Then take a deep breath and immediately refocus your attention in the present.
3. **Use trigger words:** Come up with a word or short phrase that simplifies your performance and keeps you present-minded. Examples include, “See the ball,” “Explode,” “Next point,” or “Trust it”. Trigger words can also be written on your sweatband, shoes, hat, or hand as a quick visual reminder.
4. **Use imagery:** See and feel yourself being mindfully engaged in the present moment. Then trust yourself to execute the way you have practiced and mentally rehearsed.
5. **Use centering routines:** Develop and consistently rehearse a simple routine just prior to your performance of a skill in your sport (for example, bouncing the ball 3 times before shooting a free throw in basketball). The purpose is to condition yourself to relax your body, calm your mind, and trust your readiness.
6. **Keep the competition in proper perspective.** All you have control over is your performance in the here and now. So, trust yourself to perform to the best of your ability and enjoy the opportunity to compete. If you do this, you can live with the results.

Ron Chamberlain, Ph.D.

Director of Counseling and Sport Psychology
Southwest Orthopedics and Sports Medicine
652 South Medical Drive, Suite 120
St. George, Utah 84790
(435) 251-3600
ronald.chamberlain@imail.org