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Today's Topic

Welcome back to the Coach's Corner!

This week we are going to take a look at one of my favorite mental skills, and probably the one that gets overlooked the most. I'm talking about Visualization, aka Mental Imagery.

Visualization gets overlooked so often because it is a pretty foreign concept to most people when it is first introduced to them. The idea that they can do 'imaginary' practice instead of

doing the physical work sounds pretty sketchy to a lot of coaches, and I get that. But my goal with this newsletter is to explain a little more about what Visualization is, how it works, and why it can become an incredible tool for you and your athletes.

Visualization is so much more than simply 'imagining' yourself playing your sport, or 'pretending' that you are practicing. It is a skill that is utilized by many of the most elite athletes in the world, so wouldn't you want your athletes to learn the same skill?

I talk about Visualization or Mental Imagery as being a skill because in order to do it effectively you have to learn how to control parts of your mind that are already there, and you just may not know it yet. Learning to visualize correctly isn't going to 'add' anything new to your mind, instead you are simply learning how to use the tools that are already built in, just in a more effective way than before.

Remember that visualization is never a complete substitute for physical practice, but just a supplemental tool to be used alongside your normal practices and training.

What is Visualization?

Visualization is using your mind and imagination to 'imagine' yourself executing a task. In the case of sports it could be a skill or concept needed in game. Or, on a larger scale; imagining and picturing you and your teammates holding up the state championship trophy!

Visualization can be used for many different reasons including:

- Reinforcing skills
- Practicing when you can't physically
- Motivation
- To normalize 'weird' situations

Just because you imagine that you're doing something, doesn't make for the most effective form of Visualization. There is a lot more that needs to go into it.

In order to create an effective Mental Image you first need to be in an extremely relaxed state of mind. Meaning that your heartrate is lowered, your stress levels are down, and your breathing is under control.

This is why we always want to start our Visualization sessions with some mindfulness training, but we will touch more on that later.

Possibly even more important than having the right mindset going into it, is making sure that we take into account all 5 of our senses to make the Visualization as 'real' as possible inside our own head.

When walking through a Visualization Script it is important to include:

What you SEE

What you FEEL

What you HEAR

What you TASTE

What you SMELL

I know it seems weird to think about what you are tasting or smelling during a basketball game for example, but it is vitally important because it helps make the 'imaginary' situation as real as possible to a point where our minds can't tell the difference between real and imaginary.

So in short, Visualization is basically practicing a skill in our mind instead of doing it physically, but what does this do for us?

How Does Visualization Work?

Visualization is so interesting because it truly showcases the power of our own minds.

There is tons of empirical research out there to back up the efficacy of visualization and speak to why so many of the best athletes in the world are huge advocates of it.

When we visualize effectively, we are using the same neural pathways that we create when we learn a new skill. Using visualization helps to reinforce those new pathways so they become automatic for our minds over time.

Think about it, the first time you picked up a ball as a child, you probably couldn't throw it very far. This is because you hadn't yet developed the coordination or mind-body connection to fire the proper muscles and throw the ball correctly. But over time, you practiced the skill and learned to throw a ball without even really thinking about it. This is because you have gained coordination, grown up, and created neural pathways that allow your mind to subconsciously fire that sequence of muscles and execute the skill properly.

When we visualize, our minds can't tell the difference between physically doing a skill and 'visualizing' doing that same skill. Because of this, we are still training those same neural pathways and helping our minds learn to execute the skill better and better with less and less conscious thought.

In the simplest way possible...The more we develop those pathways, the better we get at that skill.

This is why it is important to use Visualization as a supplemental tool. It is extremely difficult to learn an entirely new skill through Visualization alone, but when combining it with physical practice we are providing our minds with more reps and understanding of how to do the skill we are learning.

Visualization is a great way to get your athletes more reps than normal without the added strain on their bodies that comes with repeated physical practice and repetition.

Without diving into the neuroscience behind WHY visualization works, I hope this helps explain how this skill can be so effective and beneficial for your athletes.

This is all fine and dandy, but how do I put this to work and implement this into my practice regimen for my athletes?

How Can I Apply This?

I touched on it earlier, but one of the most important aspects of effective Visualization training is making sure you are in the proper mindset when going into it.

In order to get the most vivid visualizations possible that allow you to imagine all 5 senses, your mind and body have to be extremely relaxed.

When starting a Visualization session it is important to lead off by allowing 5 or so minutes of deep relaxation breathing to calm the mind and get ready.

Start by having all of your athletes lay on the floor or sit at desks in a quiet environment, close their eyes, and breathe deep into their bellies for a few minutes. After they have had some time to relax and get their minds to a place where they aren't anxious about what's going to happen or stressed about what happened earlier in the day, they are ready to open those new neural pathways and practice their skills.

Visualization Scripts

The most effective form of visualization is using scripts. These are often written by coaches, athletes, or mental skills coaches to help the athletes imagine a specific scenario that they want to visualize.

These scripts should be as descriptive and detailed as possible so athletes are able to incorporate all 5 of their senses and get the most out of the experience.

Good visualization scripts are hard to come by because the more specific the better. So it is hard to find pre-made scripts that fit exactly what you are looking for to help your team. Instead, I always encourage athletes and coaches to try writing their own, taking into account everything in the environment they are putting themselves in.

-What field or court are you on?

-What is the crowd like?

-Who are you playing?

-How is your body feeling?

-What thoughts are you having?

etc...

Once you have a script that fits you or your team, it can be used over and over again to help reinforce a certain skill or help familiarize them with a certain situation. Then when the skill or situation changes, the script can be changed to match the new goal for the visualization training.

My favorite 'intro' Visualization script is called the Lemon Exercise. I like it so much because it is completely unrelated to sports, so anyone can relate to it, but it is also extremely detailed so everyone is able to experience what an effective visualization script is like.

Here is the [Lemon Exercise](#).

The other option is to have your athletes write their own visualization scripts. This is a little tougher at lower competition levels because athletes aren't always sure of what they need to practice or want to visualize. But with a little help, encouragement, and explanation from their coaches, athletes will surprise you with how detailed and intricate they can be with their very own visualization scripts.

How to Practice Visualization

When first starting, it is important not to overwhelm your athletes with visualization training because there is a learning curve to it, and not everyone will catch on right away. But, once you feel that every athlete has a solid grasp on the concept, visualization can be used just like any other training aid: As often as you think your athletes need it.

I often recommend that teams do this sort of training anywhere from 1-3 times a week for 10-20 minutes.

The best way to add this into your existing practice schedule is to do it at the end of practice. This is because your athletes should already be tired, and therefore a little more relaxed. This gives them a better chance to get into that mindset that we talked about earlier.

For example, maybe 2 or 3 times a week we will leave an extra 10 minutes at the end of practice to spend some time doing relaxation breathing, followed by going through a sport-specific visualization script, and finished with more relaxation breathing.

Doing it this way doesn't detract from your existing practice plan and allows you to further reinforce what you have been teaching at practice all week.

Once your athletes have grown accustomed to using visualization, there are plenty of other times that it can be implemented, like pre-game, on their own time, or even on the bus trip to an away game.

Manifesting

The other way that Visualization can be used is to 'manifest' great things.

By having your athletes visualize themselves closing out the state championship game and raising the trophy, you are implanting that goal in their minds. You are making this experience feel real, making it feel like something they can really accomplish.

This isn't training a skill or anything like we discussed earlier, but this type of visualization can be extremely motivating for athletes. If they can 'feel' winning a state championship in their minds, they are going to chase that feeling more than ever. They are likely to give more effort and chase that goal harder than ever now that they somewhat know what it will feel like.

Like I've always said, don't be afraid to think outside the box. Use visualization in creative ways and set your athletes up for success in the process.

Remember:

Everyone's experience with visualization is different. It won't click right away for everyone and not everyone will have the same feelings towards it. This is why it is important to discuss with your athletes what they are feeling and how you can work together to improve their experience with visualization training!

This Week In Sports

Apologies in advance if you aren't a baseball fan, but it's that time of year when baseball is really starting to heat up. So you may see a lot of baseball content in this section for the next few weeks.

1. The Red Birds are Red Hot!

Just 3 weeks ago, on September 7th, the St. Louis Cardinals had a 2.8% chance of making the MLB Playoffs this year. Well on Tuesday the 29th, the Cards clinched the National League Wild Card Spot and beat the odds to make the playoffs!

This incredible feat was made possible by unbelievable 17 game win streak by the Cardinals. Yes, the cardinals haven't lost in 17 games!

As a lifelong Cardinals fan, this has been an incredible run to follow because they did it in the most 'Cardinal Way' possible.

St. Louis has been able to rip off 17 straight W's thanks to their incredible defense, the emergence of some amazing young talent, and a 40 year old Adam Wainwright seeming to turn back the clock on the mound returning to his greatness of decades past.

Every fiber of my being wants to see the Cardinals run the table and go undefeated for the remaining 5 games of the season and finish on a 22 game win streak heading into their improbable World Series Run... But only time will tell!

Go Cards!

2. The Ryder Cup's Coming Home!

Last weekend was the Ryder Cup, the biannual battle between the United States and Europe on the golf course. This spectacle pits the best golfers from both the US and Europe against each other for 3 days of heated competition.

The Ryder Cup is one of the most anticipated golf events every 2 years. To add even more drama, this year it was held here in the US at an extremely challenging golf course.

With all the built up anticipation for this year's Ryder Cup, the environment at Whistling Straits in Sheboygan, Wisconsin was unlike any other. And the USA showed up and showed out!

The United States went on to win the Ryder Cup 19-9 over Europe. (If you're not a golf fan, ignore the score... it's a weird format). It seemed the US could do no wrong in this dominating performance. No matter who Europe threw out there, they couldn't seem to keep up with their American counterparts.

This win was the largest by either team in modern history and gave the US it's first back-to-back wins on home soil since the 1980's.

The event was so much fun to watch, and I am already looking forward 2023 when the Ryder Cup heads to Italy!

Other Sport Psych Resources

1. [Yasiel Puig Walked So Everyone Else Could Run](#)

As I mentioned earlier, I am a massive baseball fan (not a surprise to anyone who knows me), and I love talking and writing about the game.

During this past week I was able to take advantage of this love and write an article for [Culture in Sports](#) who puts out tons of content about all different sports and the impact they have on society.

In this article I chose to write about the recent 'culture shift' in Major League Baseball.

Over the past few years, the MLB has started to look a little different. There is more emotion and flair than we have ever seen before. Players are finally being allowed to show emotion, play with their hearts, and change the look of the game forever.

Personally, I am a big fan of this 'new-school' approach to the old game, but I know not everyone is.

In this article I take a look back to 2013 at one of the pioneers of this movement, Yasiel Puig. Far from a household name in baseball, Puig was able to spark a revolution in just a few short years in the league. There is much more to his story than expressed in the article, but it does give you a look into the new culture shift in the MLB.

[Check out the full article HERE.](#)

2. [The Hierarchy of Mental Toughness](#)

Dr. Rob Bell, '*Mental Toughness Coach*' created a great infographic to help the rest of us better understand everything that is at play with Mental Toughness.

Mental Toughness, Mental Skills, and Sport Psychology are all pretty complex and can be difficult to understand at times. Infographics like this one are able to give us a much more simplified look at the topic.

There are tons of resources out there when it comes to these topics, some better than others. But this infographic is one of the better ones I have found.

I love this model because it really breaks down every aspect of Mental Toughness and shows how one aspect is lost without the rest... Every aspect is reliant upon every other one.

Mental Toughness is something we are all looking to cultivate in our athletes, and this is just another tool to have with us to better explain these topics to young athletes.

[The infographic and article can be found HERE.](#)

Quick Quote



"You take a deuce, you don't sit there and look at it. You flush it and move on. We gon' flush it and move on."

-Jalen Hurts

Philadelphia Eagles QB

*Sorry, but this was the weirdest quote I've heard in a while. I
couldn't help but pass it on.*

Thank you for reading and until next week, remember:

Today is a great day to change a life!

Cheers,

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