

Concentration and Attention in Sport

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What is concentration?

Within sports, coaches and athletes often use the words concentration, attention and focus interchangeably. To effectively utilize these tools, it may be helpful to define each term. Vernacchia (2003) defined concentration simply as “the ability to perform with a clear and present focus” (p. 144). What then is focus? Focus has been defined as the central point of one’s attention. Attention is simply what an individual is observing. When put together, an individual who is concentrating is said to have their attention focused clearly and presently on the task at hand. Once an athlete has developed the skills necessary for competition, their ability to control one’s attention in order to concentrate on the demands of the task is essential to consistently executing these skills.

Concentration and Attentional Control in Sport

Attention can be either internal or external and broad or narrow. When athletes are focused inward (i.e. thoughts, emotions, physical sensations), they are said to have an internal focus. Athletes who are focused on the environment outside of themselves (i.e. weather conditions), are using an external focus. In terms of width, a broad focus is when athletes are paying attention to many things at once (e.g. examining an opponent's alignment), whereas focusing on a specific point (e.g. the spot on the ball where a kicker wants to hit it) is considered narrow. During competitions, athletes are often called upon to shift across these dimensions in order to meet the required attentional demands of the situation. The overlapping nature of these dimensions leads to four types of attentional control (Nideffer & Sagal, 2006, p. 384):

	<i>EXTERNAL</i>	<i>INTERNAL</i>
<i>B R O A D</i>	<p><i>Assessing</i></p> <p>Shifts focus to the general external environment that is often changing rapidly throughout a performance. For example, a quarterback scanning the defense prior to the beginning of a play.</p>	<p><i>Analyzing</i></p> <p>Shifts focus to reviewing one's general thoughts and emotions throughout a performance. For example, a golfer considering shot selection prior to addressing the ball.</p>
<i>N A R R O W</i>	<p><i>Acting</i></p> <p>Shifts focus toward outward execution of a given skill. For example, a tennis player focusing on her toss as she begins to serve.</p>	<p><i>Preparing</i></p> <p>Shifts focus to readying oneself to execute a given skill (i.e., mental rehearsal). For example, a basketball player reviewing his self-talk prior to taking a free throw.</p>

Issues with Concentration

At any given point during a performance, athletes are faced with a number of potential distractors. Just as one's focus can be both internal and external, so too are distractors (Australian Sports Commission, 2008).

- **External distractors** could be visual or auditory, and may include other competitors, spectators, and media.
- **Internal distractors** may include negative self-talk, fatigue, and emotional arousal.

A change in one's thoughts and emotions can lead to physiological changes as well (Nideffer & Sagal, 2006). Coaches and competitors often refer to this process as Choking. Although many individuals may have different definitions of choking, it is most often associated with a rapid deterioration in performance during an important competitive situation. The choking process involves physiological and psychological changes that may affect performance (Nideffer & Sagal, 2006). For example, an athlete who is competing in an important game may develop increased muscle tension and increased anxiety, which causes an overly narrow focus and inability to identify relevant environmental cues. Effectively helping athletes to manage their thoughts and emotions may allow them to regain attentional control.

Exercises for Improving Concentration and Attentional Control

Athletes recognize that maintaining concentration is critical to performing their best, yet figuring out what to focus on and maintaining the correct attentional focus during performance is not easy. There are, however, exercises that may be helpful in improving one's ability to concentrate during competition (Performance Services Division, 2008):

- **Focus on controllables vs. uncontrollables** - make two lists. One list should be the controllables, which are those factors athletes can do something about, such as a response to a mistake or a bad play. The other list should be the uncontrollables, which are the elements of performance athletes cannot do anything about, such as the crowd's response to the athlete's mistake.
- **Simulation training** – place the athlete in “real life” scenarios during practice in order to simulate possible distractions and additional areas of focus that could occur during a competition.
- **Distraction drills** – identify distractors and deliberate attempts to shift one's attention away from the areas of required focus in order to practice shifting back to relevant cues during a performance.
- **Concentration cues** – develop a list of positive, focused cues (e.g. self-talk, visual reminders) to quickly shift one's attention to appropriate points throughout a performance.

Where can I learn more?

1. American Psychological Association – Division of Exercise and Sport Psychology - <http://www.apadivisions.org/division-47/index.aspx>
2. Association for Applied Sport Psychology Resources – <http://www.appliedsportpsych.org/resource-center/>
3. Australian Sports Commission. (2008). *Concentration: Brainwaves*. Retrieved from <http://www.ausport.gov.au/ais/sssm/psychology/brainwaves/factsheets/concentration>
4. Nideffer, R. & Sagal, M. (2006). Concentration and attention control training. In J. M. Williams (Ed.), *Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance* (pp. 382 – 403). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
5. Performance Services Division. (2008). *Sport psychology mental training manual*. Colorado Springs, CO: United States Olympic Committee.
6. Vernacchia, R. (2003). *Inner strength*. Palo Alto, CA: Warde Publishers, Inc.

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