

HOW IMAGERY GUIDES OUR BEHAVIOR

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This session, like others in the series, borrows strongly from the well-researched capacities of imagery to guide subsequent behavior. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the field of athletic performance, where research and experience have shown superior output and precision from individuals and teams when accurate imagery is employed by athletes. The same principles apply just as readily to any other situation requiring excellence and consistency of results. This session is especially helpful in contexts for which the level of activation and expectations are high, and evaluation criteria for precision and success are quite precise.

But before this experience can unfold properly, you need to prepare yourself with an exercise that will convince you of the power of imagery. The second ingredient in your recipe for success is a clear description of your IPS, that involves the use of all the modalities of imagery.

There are several excellent exercises that can convince you of the power of imagery in guiding our behavior and performance. One of these involves using partners trying to bend your arm while you discover the difference between trying to hold your arm rigid versus imaging that your arm is a steel bar that cannot be bent. These demonstrations show that imagery is effective in making sure that you flex the minimum number of muscles possible in any skill. In this way you can have maximum power and control, so that opposing muscles do not inhibit the flow of your performance.

Another excellent demonstration was first shown to me by the Swedish sport psychologist, Lars-Eric Unestaal. It is what I call the "Ring on the String." To do it, you will need about 18 inches or 50 cm. of cotton thread and a ring. When you have these materials, thread the ring and hold the two ends of the thread together between the thumb and the index finger of your writing hand. You can then allow the pendulum of the Ring on the String to hang down in front of you. You can do this by propping your elbow on a table, but for best results you can place the tip of your elbow on your knee while you sit forward on a plain kitchen chair. Next, steady the ring with your other hand so that it hangs quite still. Now, take that hand away and allow the ring to remain almost motionless. Have you got it? Okay now, in the next few moments I would like you to imagine that the ring will swing on an arc from side to side. Don't try to stop or control the movement of the ring in any way, just allow it to spontaneously move from side to side. That's it! Just let the movement develop on its own as you imagine a straight line going from side to side. If the ring doesn't move easily, I recommend that you not try so hard. Just relax and look away from the ring to a horizontal line on the floor or elsewhere in the room. That's right! Now you've got it!

As the ring swings easily from side to side, you can relax and trust that whatever pattern you see in your mind's eye, the ring will automatically follow it. For example, imagine a circle. The arc of the ring will start to change first with a slight wobble, then it will be like an ellipse, then more like an oval, then finally a perfectly round circle. Isn't that amazing! But really it's not a fluke, it's a consistent ability that we can all develop and refine. For example, you could change the pattern by imagining a vertical line, then thinking that the arc of the circle will be stretched out as the ring swings closer to you, and as it goes farthest away from you. Sure enough, the ring will swing in a straight line towards and away from you.

This exercise demonstrates the tremendous power of the unconscious mind in guiding our behavior in a precise yet effortless way. Imagery supplies the template or script in a visuo-spatial language that the mindbody can understand, to create the self-fulfilling prophesy of success. We also know that our bodies' physiology is programmed and affected by imagery in a way that is almost identical to real-life experience. For example, remember how your heart beat fast in some scary scenes of a thriller movie you once watched? Well, that's how the imagination programs and prepares our bodies for action.

Providing we set a goal that is physically and technically achievable for our level of skill, imagery can supply the power and precision for quality performance. In a similar way, the positive emotions of joy and excitement can provide the motivation and energy to fulfill the promise of excellence.

Now that we are convinced of the power of imagery, we are ready to build an imagery model of all the skills that constitute the Ideal Performance State. This is a model of linked skills executed beautifully in the competition environment.

In developing every athletic skill that we need to be a champion, we need to have an accurate image of what that skill involves. But how do we build that image? Well, how about starting with a **visual** image. Watch videotapes of world-class athletes with your body build and body geometry doing the skill. Imagine that it is you that you are seeing. Now, begin to change the camera angle so that the scene is shot over your shoulder, and finally through your eyes as the athlete doing the skill. Play it through many times until every detail is revealed and well known to you. Check with your coaches to be sure the image is accurate and appropriate for you. Learn the details for precision on each practice run or session. Practice is not just for training your body; it is for supplying you

with exact and precise detail of the imagery you will need to guide your body through optimal performance in competition. Remember that the more precise the imagery model, the more precise the results, so learn as much as you can to reinforce the accuracy of your imagery model every time you practice.

Apply this same analysis to build an auditory component into your imagery model. Imagine what it would **sound** like as you applied the athletic skill you are executing in the context of competition. Learn to discriminate between noise, the extraneous sound you can ignore or filter out, compared to signal, the sounds you need to attend to in guiding or refining your ideal performance. Identify and remember the sources of signal sound, the echoes and the shapes of the sounds in your body, in your equipment, and in the sport environment. Filter out the sound of the crowds, or other events that don't have a bearing on your game.

Next develop your **tactile** sense in your imagery model. Imagine the texture of touch and pressure on your body surface, the feeling of the clothes you are wearing, the equipment you are using. Most important of all, imagine what it would feel like within your body, your **kinesthetic** sense. Feel your body move through space, knowing where your trunk and limbs are, and feeling the forces of rotation, angulation, and momentum as you project your body through this skill.

The next element is the use of your senses of taste and smell wherever possible in anchoring the response of high skill achievement. For example, I often have an athlete wear a small article of clothing from practice sessions in the competition environment, or conversely, an item from competition in the practice environment. This allows the athlete to be conditioned to cross the transitions from practice to competition with the smell of success. Believe it or not, the smell of your body and the sports environment at

the point of success is a powerful unconscious cue for success at other times. So the next time you execute a skill perfectly, remember to take in the senses of taste and smell at that time to imprint that success.

The final element in building an imagery model of the Ideal Performance State is the **flow of emotions when you are very happy with your achievements**. For this, go back to the last time you executed the skill perfectly in a practice session, or even better, the best you have ever done in that skill in a competition situation. Feel the sense of energy, flow, and enjoyment of the emotion of doing the skill with exquisite precision and perfection. If you have never done the skill perfectly in competition, then use the power of imagery to imagine how good it would feel to nail it at a key moment in the game. Feel the thrill, the joy, the elation!

Now that you have built the imagery model for the IPS for each skill, play through **linked** sequences of these skills in a routine in the game situation. Observe the smoothness in combinations of skillsets and transitions between stages of execution throughout key scenes in your sport.

To summarize, the Ideal Performance State is a dynamic and linked imagery model of optimal precision in athletic skill in the competition environment. It involves using all of your sensory channels: visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, and even your other senses, as well as the emotions of joy and elation, to imprint the image of success and excellence in sport.