

Integrating Mental Skills Training Into a Strength and Conditioning Program

Brian Zuleger, MS, CSCS, HFS

Graduate Assistant Missouri Institute for Positive Coaching, Volunteer Track and Field Coach, University of Missouri

Pat Ivey, M Ed, CSCS, MSCC

Associate Athletic Director for Athletic Performance, University of Missouri

Introduction

Many professional and university-level competitive athletes are utilizing the services of sport psychologists and their performances are benefiting from the knowledge and skills learned from these professional educators. There are many sport psychology professionals working with colleges and universities both as professors and private consultants. Some schools have gone as far as implementing full-fledged sport psychology programs within their athletic departments with full-time staff. An area where sport psychology is rarely used, but has great potential for application is in the strength and conditioning program by the strength coaches. The focus for this article will be on how to effectively integrate mental skills training into a collegiate strength and conditioning program.

How Can Mental Skills Training Help My Athletes?

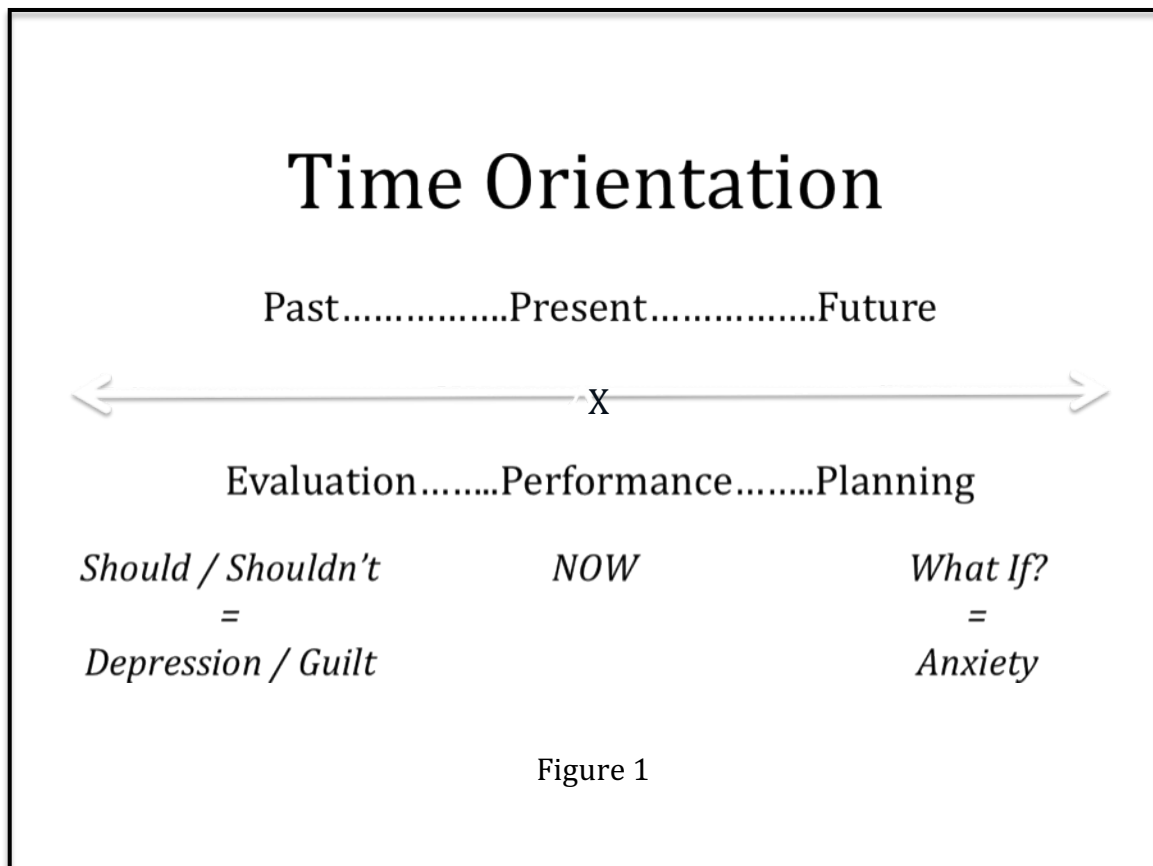
The basis of sport psychology can be simplified to the mental skill of thinking right in sport (McGuire, 2008). Athletes all have thoughts, sometimes they have right thoughts, and sometimes they have wrong thoughts. They may have many thoughts happening in a short time. While other times they may obsess about one thought for a long time, but it is not possible to have more than one thought at a time. Thus it is important for athletes to be aware of their thoughts in an effort to focus on right thoughts conducive to achieving peak performance. When wrong thoughts occur athletes need to be aware and have an action plan to be able to re-focus on the right thoughts. When an athlete is thinking right, the chances for improved performance are much higher.

Focus

Focus is a skill in the same way passing a football is a skill or doing a power clean is a skill. Therefore, focus, just like power cleaning and throwing, can be taught and learned (McGuire, 2012a). "Focus is just a thought, it is a skill, it is controllable, and it is a choice (McGuire, 2012b)." "You make the choice; you take control (McGuire, 2012b)!" The five keys to teaching the skill of focus are time orientation, positive self-talk, composure, concentration and confidence (McGuire, 2012b).

The first component of being focused is being "in the moment" and "totally in the present" (McGuire, 2012b). We have established that thinking right is where everything starts. In order to focus the athlete must be thinking right and also

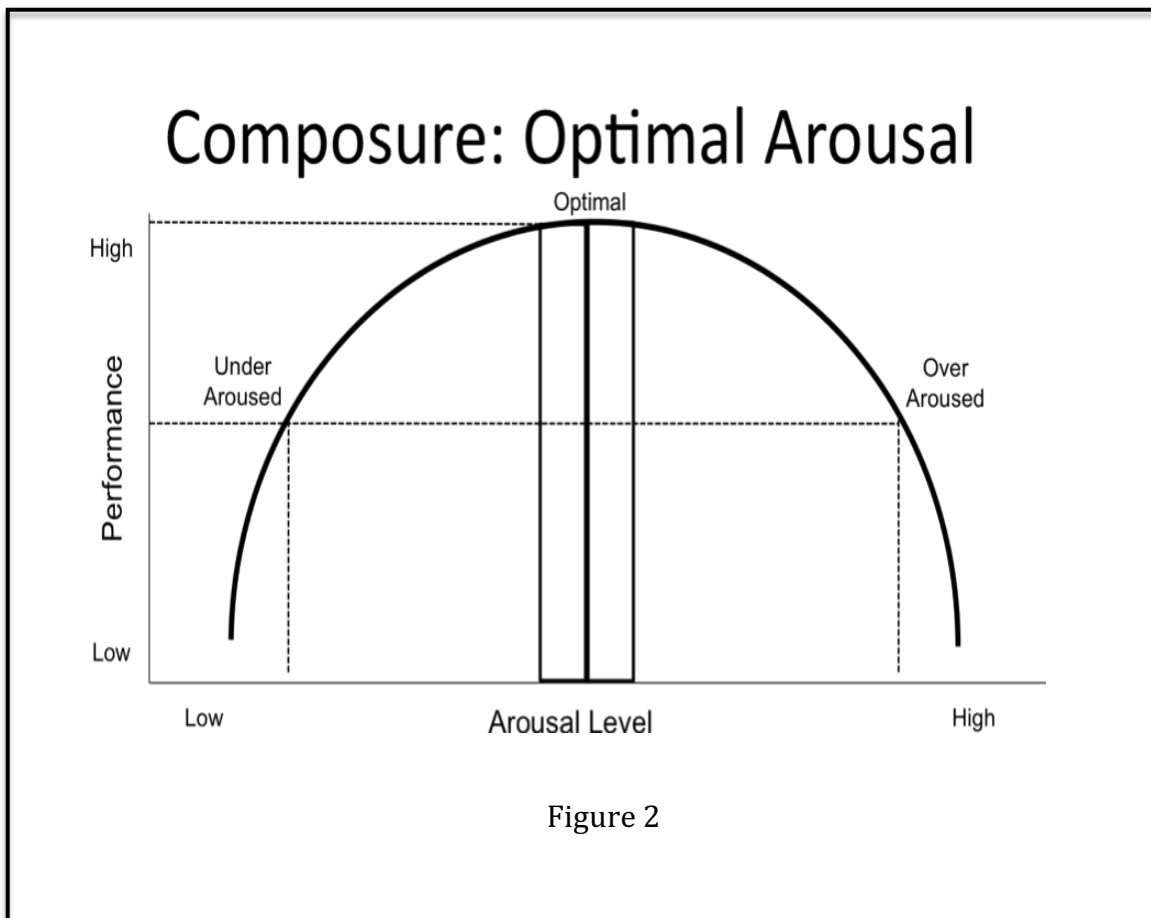
thinking in the present. Thoughts can be past, present or future oriented (see Figure 1). A present oriented focus is necessary in order for athletes to perform at their best in the moment. Awareness of the need to be in the present is the first step, second is implementing a control strategy. Thought stoppage is a control strategy. When an athlete is trying to be in the moment and has wrong thoughts (past or future, doubt, fear, anxiety, etc.) one method for thought stoppage is to ask the question "Where are you?" with the answer being "Right here! Right now!" (McGuire, 2012a). Another method is using a physical cue such as wearing a rubber band or bracelet that can be snapped to cue the wrong thought to stop and replace it with a right thought (Vernacchia, 2003). Athletes are often going to the weight room or to conditioning before or after their technical practice and it is easy for them to still be thinking about the future or past practice instead of being focused on the present strength and conditioning session. As a strength and conditioning coach, mastering this step of focusing with your athletes will help them to transition not only into the weight room session but also between exercises, which increases the quality of the session.



Self-talk is the internal conversation that you have going on all the time. Part of focusing is working to have that self-talk be positive. Athletes often develop a habit of having negative self-talk, which is thinking wrong. In order to have positive self-

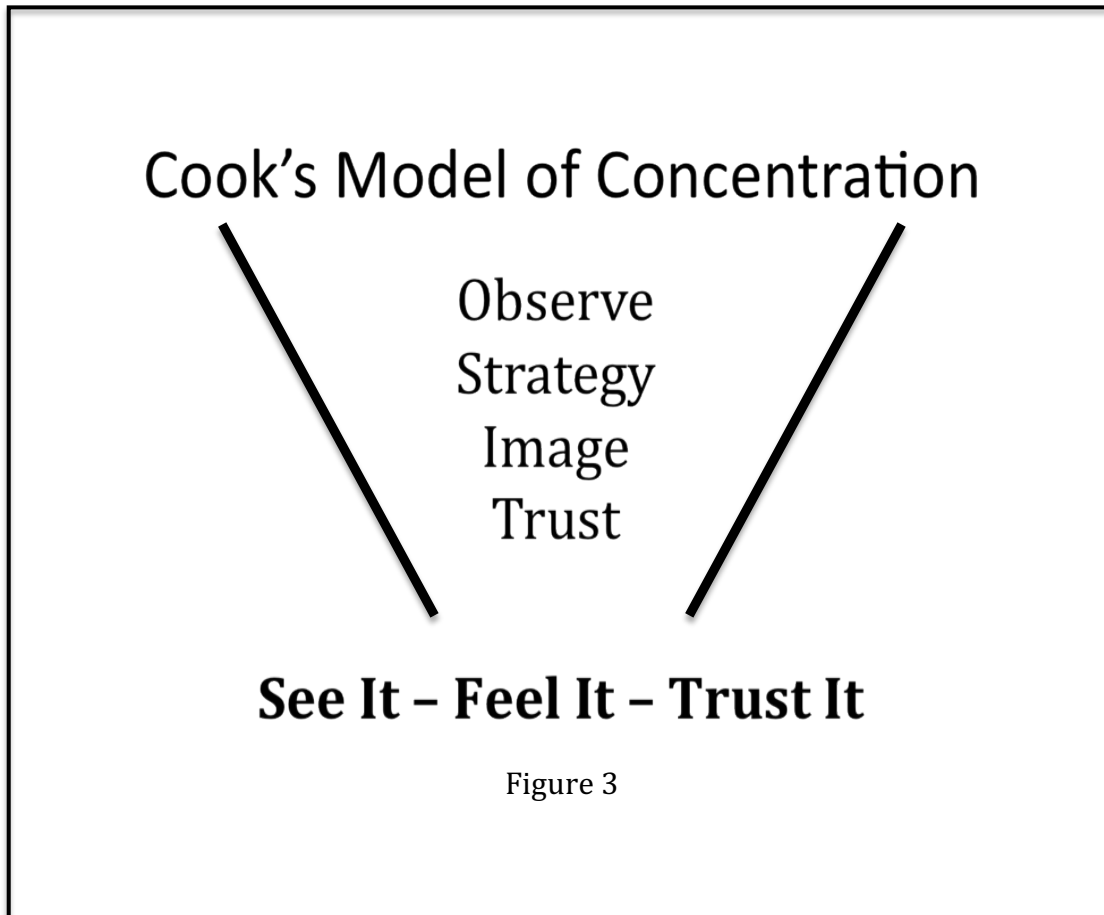
talk athletes must learn to use affirmations (McGuire, 2012b). "Affirmations are strong positive statements about yourself (McGuire, 2012b)." Affirmations should be specific to the individual, positive, logical, strategic, motivating and powerful (McGuire, 2012b). Belief in self and belief in method are keys to having strong positive affirmations. Athletes might doubt their ability to perform a certain exercise, lift a heavier weight than normal or they may just really dislike a certain exercise. By using positive affirmations to reaffirm their competence athletes can be better prepared to perform.

Composure can be looked at as energy management. Learning to control your physical, mental and emotional energies is the essence of composure (Vernacchia, 2003). The energy levels of an athlete have an optimal level for performance, often referred to as optimal arousal (see Figure 2). This optimal level of arousal varies depending on the specific demands of the activity. In the weight room an athlete may need a high level of energy in a short time period in order to perform a max lift, while performing a lift for endurance purposes may require some energy to be conserved in order to complete the sets and reps. Peak performance occurs at the optimal arousal level, thus if an athlete is has too much or too little energy for the given task, performance suffers. As a strength and conditioning coach, you can teach your athletes how to "dial it in" so that they are at their optimal level for peak performance. This takes practice as each athlete responds differently.



Concentration requires finding what matters, and then focusing on it (McGuire, 2012b). The weight room can be a great place to practice concentration as typically there should be few distractions, the setting is a controlled environment and the tasks often involve just the athlete performing the action by oneself. The athlete can learn and practice concentration and staying focused for a certain time period and then practice it over and over again for each rep and set. The varying exercises and warm-up/cool down routines allow athletes to practice concentrating for a variety of activities, which can be transferred to the various areas of sport and life. Cook's Model of concentration (Figure 3, Cook, 1996) uses a four-step routine, which consists of observation, strategy, imaging (visualization) and trust. Within each step there are specific tasks. The first step is to observe. In the weight room this may involve looking around at who is in the room? Is it full of people or is it just coach and myself? Is there music playing? What is the temperature like? What equipment do I need for this exercise? The second step is to form your strategy for the activity. In the weight room this may involve going over the technique for the particular exercise. What is required to perform it correctly? What do you personally need to focus on when performing this exercise? The third step is to image or visualize. The athlete visualizes him/herself performing the exercise correctly and successfully. The athlete is thinking about what it feels like to perform the activity in this way. At this point all decisions have been made, there should be no more thoughts questioning the task. The final step is to trust. This can be accomplished by using

some simple cues to reaffirm trust in preparation and ability. Cook created this simple cue, which applies to any activity "See It, Feel It, Trust It." (Cook, 1996). This can be even further simplified to the easily remembered acronym, "SFT" (Cook, 1996). It should be noted that this is just one example of a cue, and cues should have a personalized and powerful meaning for each athlete. At this point the athlete is ready to perform and should be mentally passive and physically active.



Confidence is a just a thought. Like any other thought, you can make a choice to be confident or not to be confident. Choose to be confident (McGuire, 1999). The athletes have the ability to choose their attitude and choosing to be confident helps improve focus and performance. Choosing to become more competent and choosing to focus on your performance are the two keys to building confidence (McGuire, 2012b). Competence is the knowledge of how to do something and knowing that you can do it. Competence is gained through practice and working with the coaches to learn the physical and mental skills necessary for the sport. Competence builds confidence. Choosing to focus on your performance is focusing on the process of the performance as opposed to focusing on the outcome of that performance. We all want to win and often as athletes and coaches we worry about losing and everything that goes along with that. Instead focus on the performance and the process that is necessary to put you and your athletes in the best position to have a chance to win.

Strength and conditioning plays a role in the process of developing an athlete to have the best chance to win in every sport. Setting goals and teaching athletes to focus during strength and conditioning sessions on the process and how the exercises they are performing are helping them to work towards their goals and build competence. As athletes build competence and attain their goals, they are building their confidence to be able to go out and perform at ones best when it is needed. This is the essence of mental skills training and sports psychology.

Goal Attainment

Athletes are good at setting goals but rarely are athletes good at setting goals that are attainable. The idea with goal attainment is that if the goal is realistic, specific, and measureable and has a time orientation than it has a better chance of being attained. Long-term goals (Example: Bench press 225lbs. 20 times) are important, but the bulk of the time should be spent on attaining short-term goals (Example: Bench press 225lbs. 5 times in 4 sets with rest). Short-term goals should be action specific in relation to the long-term goal. With each short-term goal that is attained, confidence grows and thus performance improves. Goal attainment with short-term goals means that goal setting is a re-occurring process, not a once a year or season process, it is a continuous process that occurs daily and weekly.

Role of the Strength and Conditioning Coach

The strength and conditioning coach can play a unique role in the delivery of sport psychology as he/she often works with the athletes on a year round basis. Having this consistent long-term contact with the athletes allows for relationships to be established over time and for the athletes to build trust in the coaches. Athletes may be resistant at first to "buying into" mental skills training, but with time and a consistent well-planned message from the coaching staff, and strength coaches, allows for the athletes to learn and to adjust to the idea of doing mental skills training. Another benefit to the strength and conditioning coach integrating mental skills training is that the weight room can be a great place to learn mental skills as there are often multiple reps of the same exercise along with multiple different types of exercises, which allows for multiple opportunities to practice your mental skills. For example at the University of Missouri, the athletic development staff that works with the football team delivers a daily message to the athletes on sports nutrition, sports training and sports psychology. Furthermore they are working in each training session on how to focus and the five components that make up focus. The football coaches encourage the strength and conditioning staff to provide assistance by following up with the athletes to provide that consistency and repetition in the message that mental skills are an import aspect of their philosophy.

Comprehensive Integrated Approach

Integrating mental skills training requires a comprehensive approach involving everyone who plays a role in the development of an athlete. The head coach of the

sport is the most important leader in establishing a philosophy that has sport psychology as a part of the process. The next two most influential people in the development of the athlete are the strength and conditioning coach and the athletic trainer. Both of these individuals spend many hours with an athlete over the course of a year. Other people involved that may spend less time with the athlete include the sport psychologist, academic support staff, sport nutritionist, etc.

The core of social responsibility in the University of Missouri Athletic Department is making right choices. Coaches and support staff have been educated in sport psychology and thus are better able to understand how their role, plays into the philosophy of developing the athlete as a total person. Even the dining hall has incorporated sport psychology using signage educating the athletes on how to focus, make healthy food choices and incorporate thinking right into their nutrition. All the people involved share the philosophy of integrating mental skills training and making right choices. When everyone involved in guiding and influencing the athlete is speaking the same language and incorporating mental skills into their piece of the program it makes for better communication and increases the chance of success of the overall program.

Conclusion

Mental skills are an important aspect of athletic development and like physical skills, should be practiced. The benefit to mental skills training is that it can be practiced anywhere at anytime. The weight room can be a great environment and the strength and conditioning coach can be a great teacher in integrating mental skills training into the program. The caveat is that just like it is necessary to become educated in the proper science and technique behind training athletes physically, it is also necessary to have proper education in the science and application of psychological training specifically pertaining to sport. Every coach wants their athlete to be able to perform at their best at the right time. Sport psychology is a great resource to help develop an athlete to be able to perform at their peak. It is recommended that strength and conditioning coaches seek out sport psychology professionals who are actively involved in working with sport and utilize them as a resource to help improve yourself and in turn your athletes and programs. Other educational resources are beneficial such as books, research articles, DVDs, etc. (see references and recommended resources list).

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank a group of people that without their vision and support this comprehensive integrated program of athletic development would not be possible at the University of Missouri. Athletic Director Mike Alden, Executive Associate Athletic Director for Student Services Dr. Bryan Maggard, Director of Sport Psychology Dr. Rick McGuire, and the head coaches. A special thanks to Coach Gary Pinkel for his support and assistance in integrating sport psychology into his

program and his work with Dr. McGuire and Coach Ivey in developing the "From the Whistle to the Snap" program for Missouri Football.

References

- Cook, D. L. (1996). Creative concentration. In R. A. Vernacchia, R. T. McGuire, & D. L. Cook, *Coaching mental excellence: "It does matter whether you win or lose..."* (pp.81-92).
- McGuire, R. T. (2012a). *From the Whistle to the Snap: Winning the Mental Game of Football*. Ames, IA: Championship Productions.
- McGuire, R. T. (2012b). The skill of focus. *Techniques, Vol. 5, Number 4*.
- McGuire, R. T. (2008). Thinking right in sport: The critical importance of mental training. *Techniques, Vol. 1, Number 3*.
- McGuire, R. T. (1999). Confidence is a choice. *Track and Field Coaches Review, Vol. 72,(1)*.
- McGuire, R. T. (1996). Ready or not...the gun will go off: United States track and field athletes mental preparation for the 1996 Olympic games. *Training and Conditioning, Vol. 6, No. 4*.
- McGuire, R. T. (1992). "Concentration Skills for the Track and Field Athletes: AN Application of Cook's Model of Concentration. *Track and Field Quarterly, Volume 92, Number 1, Spring*.
- Vernacchia, R. A. (2003). *Inner Strength*. Palo Alto, CA: Warde
- Vernacchia, R. A., McGuire, R. T., & Cook, D. L. (1996). *Coaching mental excellence: "It does matter whether you win or lose..."* Portola Valley, CA: Warde.

Recommended Resources

- DVD- McGuire, R. T. (2012). *From the Whistle to the Snap: Winning the Mental Game of Football*. Ames, IA: Championship Productions.
- Book and DVD- Ivey, P., & Stoner, J. (2012). *Complete Conditioning for Football*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Book- Orlick, T. (2007). *In Pursuit of Excellence*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Book- Jackson, S. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1999). *Flow in Sports: The keys to optimal experiences and performances*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Book- Vernacchia, R. and Statler, T. (Eds.) (2005). *The Psychology of High-Performance Track and Field*. Mountain View, CA: Tafnews Press.
- Book- Williams, J. M. (Ed.) (2009). *Applied Sport Psychology: Personal Growth to Peak Performance*. New York: McGraw Hill Higher Education.