



Building A Mental Toolbox

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CONCENTRATION

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Personal Achievement, Team Unity & Competitive Excellence

PO Box 13064 Burton WA 98013 . info@vashonaquaticclub.org . www.vashonaquaticclub.org

CONCENTRATION

Focusing on the Right Thing at the Right Time

What I try to achieve during the season is a relaxed state of concentration. I simply try to cleanse my mind of the pressures that people are trying to heap on me.

NFL Quarterback

Immediately prior to competing, I'm focused on my breathing. I'm aware of that. I also focus on the lane. When I'm on, it is almost silent except for the referee's whistle. I'm really geared into that sound and smaller details.

1992 Olympic Team Swimmer

Concentrate! Keep your head in the game! Stay focused. You've probably heard your coach, teammates and even yourself repeat these and similar phrases over and over again. The ability to maintain concentration while immersed in the pressure of competition is critical to optimum performance. If you lose your focus to a sellout crowd, a distracting competitor, or nagging self-doubt, you are not only battling your opponents, you're battling yourself. Although we may not always be able to eliminate distractions, successful athletes take control of their performance by blocking out unnecessary distractions while responding to important cues.

What Is Concentration?



Concentration is paying attention to the right things at the right time. It is the ability to attend to relevant factors and disregard irrelevant factors.

This is not an easy task given all the internal and external “things” that are present in practice and competition. As you turn with 50m to go, where are you focused? You're waiting for the starter's gun—how is your mind occupied? When you are at the midway point of a T-30, what are you focusing on? What things break your concentration? By identifying the attentional demands of your swimming, you can direct your focus more effectively. Chance favors only the prepared mind. Prepare to excel by preparing to concentrate.

Figuring Out What to Focus on

A primary challenge related to effective concentration is figuring out the “right things” and “relevant factors” to attend to in various practice and competition

situations. While knowing where to focus is no guarantee of being able to concentrate effectively, it is a step in the right direction. In determining “where” to focus, it makes intuitive sense to place mental energy on things that one can control. Rather than focusing on what a competitor is doing in warm-up (which you can’t control), it is more productive to focus on what you can control...your own warm-up.

Controlling the Controllables

An initial strategy to aid in figuring out where to focus is to distinguish between *controllables* and *uncontrollables*. In fact, ineffective concentration can often be traced to focusing on uncontrollable variables. For example,

- ◆ Do you ever fall in to the trap of focusing on mistakes? Nobody is perfect, in the heat of action or in the middle of a set in practice, mistakes happen. If you allow yourself to be distracted by a mistake and dwell on it, you are in fact creating a break in concentration. Let the event go, you can’t change it, move on to the next stroke or the next length and focus your attention in the present, what you can control.
- ◆ Do you get caught focusing too far in the future? Do you play the “what if” game? What if I false start? What if I lose the race? What if I miss a turn? Concentrating on future events also negatively affects concentration. By focusing on the mistakes that may be made in future events poor performance is actually more likely to happen. Again try to focus yourself in the present, here and now - - that is all you can control.

Follow the K.I.S.S. Principle

Keep It Simple, Swimmer. Another strategy is to keep concentration simple. It is easy to get caught up in trying to attend to everything that relates to practice and competition performance. Athletes have a multitude of things they are trying to “manage” (stroke rate, technique, breathing, race strategy, coach feedback, attitude, etc) in competition but it is unrealistic to attempt to focus on them all. Read the following two examples and identify if either of them affects your performance.

- ◆ Attending to too Many External Cues. Being at the competition venue can be overwhelming, so many new sites, people, and other distractions. Athletes sometimes get too caught up in the external stimuli and forget about concentrating on their internal cues.
- ◆ Overanalysis of Body Mechanics. Attending to stroke technique and how you feel in the water is important. However sometimes too much focus on these aspects can lead to deterioration in performance. Finding the right balance of technique focus is important in order to maintain optimal concentration levels.

A general rule of thumb we adhere to at USA Swimming is that it is realistic to attend to no more than 2-3 things during a race or a set in practice. Before a race or a set in practice, identify the 2-3 critical things to attend to such as body

rotation, acceleration into the turn, or maintaining stroke rate. Make sure you can control or manage the 2-3 things you are going to focus on.

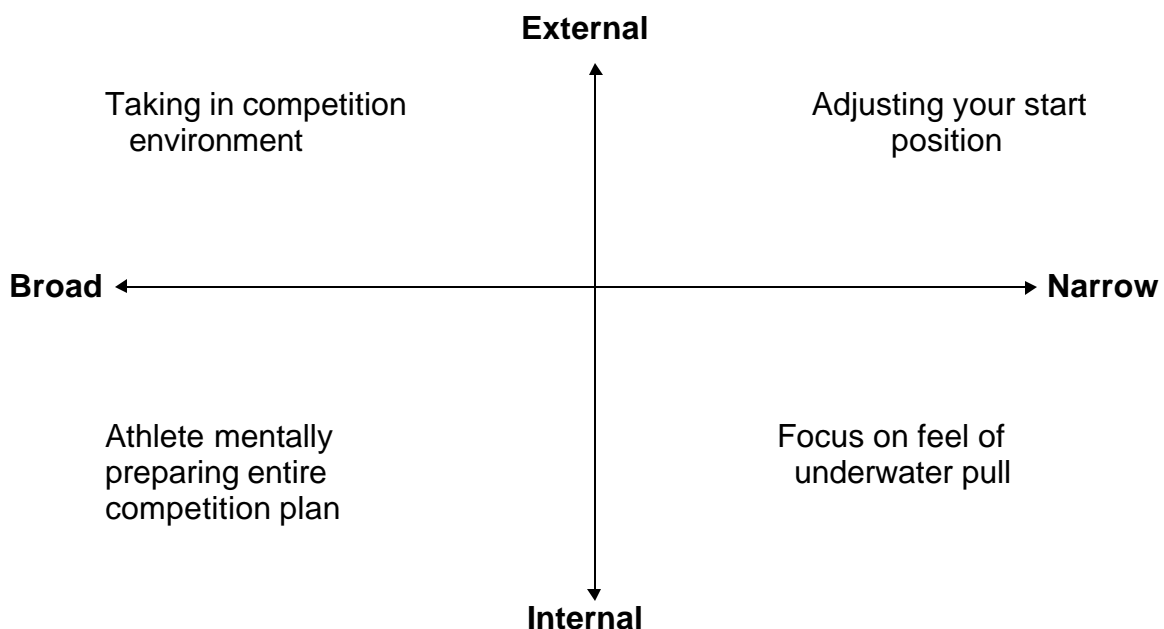
Dimensions of Attentional Style (Adapted from Nideffer & Sharpe, 1978)

Now that we know a little bit about the importance of identifying where to focus your attention, the following information on attentional style may help place it in context. Below is a model developed by sport psychologist Bob Nideffer which illustrates the four different ways athletes have been found to focus their attention. Understanding the four different types of attention, and learning about your own strengths and weaknesses are the first steps toward developing your own concentration skills.

Note that there are two dimensions of attention, **width** (on a continuum from broad to narrow) and **direction** (from internal to external).

1. **Width (broad -- narrow)** refers to how many things you are paying attention to at once. When your attention is broad, you are paying attention to many things. When you have a narrow attentional focus, you are usually concentrating on specifically one or a very few things. A football quarterback, scanning the field for receivers, has to have broad attention, while a golfer getting ready to putt is likely to have a more narrow focus of attention.

2. **Direction (internal -- external)** is defined by whether your attention is focused internally toward your own thoughts and feelings, or externally toward the events in your environment. A swimmer, imaging her upcoming race in her head, has an internal focus, while a baseball player up to bat, has an external focus as he watches the pitch coming in.





How Do I Use This Information?

To make use of the information in this model, first you must determine which of these four attentional styles are your strengths and which styles you need additional assistance developing. Every athlete has his or her own strengths and weaknesses; some athletes are very good at one dimension and weak on the others, while other athletes may be somewhat skilled in all dimensions.

In general, we find that athletes in closed skill sports tend to use a narrow-internal attentional focus. Closed skill sports include sports such as swimming and diving that don't have to react to the changing environment. For the most part they compete against themselves and are in control of the situation. Because swimmer and diver's competition environment is rather static, they need to be more aware of their body and overall energy management. Therefore, closed skill athletes should tend to have a more narrow-internal attentional focus.

This is in contrast to attentional styles of athletes in open skilled sports such as soccer and tennis where the environment is constantly changing, causing the athletes to need to evaluate and reevaluate the situation and then react. Open skill athletes tend to use broad-external attentional skills more often than closed skill athletes do.

The other two attentional styles, broad-internal and narrow-external are important for both open and closed sport athletes to master.

Now, through understanding the different types of attentional styles and the difference between open and closed skills sports, its time to assess your swimming event. Which of Nideffer's attentional skills is top priority in terms of your events demands and your focusing strengths? Exercise 1 is designed to help you systematically review your own competition situation and determine which attentional dimensions you need.

Strategies to Enhance your Concentration Skills

Below is a list of strategies and exercises that can be practiced in order to hone concentration skills.

Understanding "where you attend" in practice. Remember, a challenge in effective concentration is figuring out the relevant things to attend to. Practice is a perfect setting to begin understanding where you focus your attention. For two to three days in practice become very aware of where your focus is directed.

Write down where your attention is focused in your training log (or Exercise 1). After your self-awareness days, evaluate the information to identify where you tend to focus in training.

Chances are at times your attention is all over the place. The critical question to ask is how this affects your performance. At times, it is okay to think random thoughts or sing songs to yourself. But, there are times when doing so probably hurts performance such as when doing drills or during hard intervals. At these times, where should you focus? What strategies can you use to heighten your concentration levels?

Be Realistic. Effective concentration is mentally draining. It takes mental energy to keep your thoughts focused in a relevant, controllable, beneficial direction. It is not necessary or very realistic to expect yourself to focus throughout a practice or meet. However, it is important to identify the “critical moments” when you need to attend to the task at hand. It is at these moments when you want to “kick in” your focus.

Use Cue Words. Cue words are a form of self-talk. Cue words are designed to trigger a specific response, either instructional or motivational. For instance, you can use cue words to direct your attention back to the task at hand. If your mind begins to wander, using a cue word such as “focus” can help you remain on task. Likewise, motivationally cue words serve to remind you of the task at hand, if you feel yourself paying too much attention to stroke technique in the middle of a race, saying “race” to yourself can bring you back to the task at hand.

Practice with Distractions Present. So often the practice situations are calm and controlled, not anything like the racing environment. Coaches, it may be beneficial to set up practice times with difference distractions present, such as an audio tape of meet sounds played during practice or a set of 50’s alternating swimming with goggles filled and swimming without a cap. By exposing your swimmers to typical meet distractions they become immune to them and can then learn how to just concentrate on their swimming

Practice Shifting Attention. We identified the four general quadrants of attention and acknowledged that the situation, in part, dictates the appropriate attentional focus. Given this, a critical skill is the ability to shift - - to go from a broad external to a narrow internal focus. Swimming practice is the ideal place to experiment with shifting attention. Choose three to four places to direct your attention (i.e. stroke count, competition, feel of stroke...). Then set intervals through which you want to scroll through these attentional directions (i.e. every 100 yards, every ½ lap, every 10 strokes). By practicing attention shifting in practice, it will be easier to call upon this skill in competition.

Routines. Creating and practicing a competition routine can help to focus your attention and concentration on the right things at the right time. A competition

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routine is a set of actions that you take each time before you race. Your routine could include the warm-up you do (the amount of yardage, the amount of time it takes you to warm-up, the amount of time you want between warm-up and race...), what you do while waiting for your race (imagery...), how long before the event you go to the blocks, what you do standing behind the blocks preparing for the race, and the race itself. If you take the time before you get to the meet to practice your routine your chances of getting distracted and losing concentration are lessened.