

Visualization is a proven tool of top athletes. Here's how to make it work for you.

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You're the Star in Mental Movies

by Kathy Toon

Imagine yourself watching a movie where you're the star. This movie features you skating your absolute best. Imagine what you look like on the big screen. Picture the arena, the ice, the fans, your coach and the other skaters.

When we watch movies, we see peak performance. Actors summon their best performances to make movies believable and entertaining. In order to realize your potential as an athlete, you must make your own movies again and again until your performance is razor sharp. To do this, you will engage in a special kind of rehearsal called "visualization."

As an athlete, it is important to develop your skills to the point where they become automatic (especially under pressure). Nothing can replace the endless hours of practice required to make physical skills automatic, but visualization can enhance your ability to get there more quickly.

Visualization is a proven tool of top athletes. They use it to create the perfect performance - seeing and feeling themselves perform to their maximum potential. They also recreate past successful performances, calling to mind what they saw, felt and thought. Visualization can help you manage your emotions, build your confidence, refine your skills, improve your focus and prepare for competition.

Engaging all of your senses (sight, sound, touch, smell and feel) is the key to the process. Make your images vivid. In addition to seeing yourself perform, bring up all of the emotional pieces as well - how it feels to perform well, the connection with your coach, etc. Visualization enhances learning. It is possible to learn new skills faster by using a combination of physical practice and mental imagery than by using either one alone. The reverse is also true - negative imagery can actually hurt performance.

You can change your emotional state by evoking the appropriate images during visualization. The chemistry of billions of cells within your body changes in response to what you imagine. When you produce images in your mind, you are in command of the changes taking place in your body. You can use visualization to improve your technical, tactical and emotional skills.

You can practice visualization almost any time and any place. To develop your visualization skills, start by using non-stressful images. Progress to visualizing specific skills and competitive situations. Imagery is most effective when your mind is calm and your body is relaxed. Just like physical skills, visualization can be improved only through practice. Spend at least 10 to 15 minutes each day visualizing.

Music can have a profound effect on your physiology. Using music during visualization can reinforce the physiological mechanism you are working to elicit. Different music will bring about different emotions - instrumentals tend to be more calming, whereas rock tends to be more pump-up. Find what works for you.

Here are some things athletes visualize:

Technical and Tactical Skills

When learning a new skill or changing an existing technique, watch someone perform the task correctly. Then mentally become the performer, and practice the skill in your mind. Break the skill down into its key parts, and pay attention to how one part transitions into the next. Build your sessions to the point where the transitions are seamless. To enhance your mental rehearsal, add movement to the exercise. Use the actual muscle groups involved in the skill, and be as active as you can in the situation. If you can stand up and move around in the process, do it. There is no limit to the amount of time you should spend on mental rehearsal - the beauty of it is there's no wear and tear on your body.

Best Performance

Go back in your mind and select one of your best performances. Remember everything about it - what you did to prepare, what you were wearing, where you were, who you were competing against, who was there watching, everything you saw during the competition, the thoughts you had, what you heard, everything you felt, how you handled mistakes, how you handled success and how the competition ended.

Break Through

This is a chance to practice overcoming an obstacle you face. Perhaps this is a specific move you've had trouble executing in competition, or a skater you've never beaten. See yourself overcoming this obstacle and excelling to the next level.

Big Competition

See the big competition in your mind before you ever set foot on the ice. See, hear and feel it go exactly the way you would like it to. Similar to an actor at dress rehearsal, create the competitive situation in your mind, and rehearse your responses to various challenges and situations. Think about how you will act and what you will think.

Long-Term Goal

See yourself accomplishing the vision you set for yourself. Imagine how you will feel when you achieve your goal. Think of the excitement and satisfaction. See your coach's, family's and fans' reactions. Make the day come alive.

To practice visualization, choose one aspect of your performance on which to focus. Write a visualization script for that aspect. Be very specific. Select a time of day when you are at your best - awake and focused. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed, and get comfortable. Use music if it helps. Create a mental movie for yourself. Now enter that movie - hear the sounds, smell the air, feel the sweat on your skin and feel your feet on the ice. Make your movie as vivid as possible. Your process of making mental movies has just started.

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