INTRODUCTION TO FOCUS

Focus Defined

"Genius is the ability to reduce the complicated to the simple." C.W. Ceran

William James, the father of American Psychology who taught from a very positive perspective about the human condition provides a classic definition of concentration:

"Everyone knows what attention is. It is taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seems several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration of consciousness is the essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others."

That was written in 1890. In other words, concentration is paying attention to the right things at the right time. It is the ability to discard or ‘withdraw’ from some things, like distractions, and give your mind’s attention to ‘one out of all possible objects, or trains of thought’ and to nothing else. Consider what, as an athlete, are the things outside of you (external), such as sights, sounds, actions that you need to pay attention to and when do you need to pay attention to them? Further, what is necessary information and what is unneeded, even unwanted? Ask yourself what kind of information you want from the competition environment. How do you get that information? How will you use it?

Then consider: what are the things that come from inside of you (internal) that you need to focus on? When do you need it? How do you use it? Perhaps you are even getting more than you can use. For example, a skier standing in the starting gate, is that an appropriate time to be thinking about how well your skis are tuned? When you are about to make the first turn of your race run, is that the time to recall yesterday’s training mistakes?

Now consider those times when you seem to compete effortlessly, what are you concentrating on in those moments? When do you usually get caught off guard? What draws your focus away from where it needs to be and what brings it back? By identifying the attentional demands of ski racing, you can direct your focus more effectively. If you can recognize your own attentional strengths as well as the challenges and your preferences, you can anticipate and prepare yourself for critical performance situations. Chance favors only the prepared mind. Prepare to excel by preparing to concentrate.

There is a saying from a sport psychologist, Robert Rotella, who works with some of the very best PGA golfers, that “A confident player (of golf) plays with his eyes”. What this translates into is that when a player trusts his game he is not dwelling on the mechanics, he is free to follow his strategy without a great deal of thought about his technique. He looks where he wants the ball to go and sends it there. The swing and the club are the means, not the ends.

This thought has validity in all other sports. When we have confidence in our technique, our preparation, and our equipment we are free to focus on strategy and tactics; we are free to compete with our eyes and our other senses.

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This thought assumes a critical aspect for application: that we know where to look, what to look at and what to look for, when to look at what, and that we have the skills to automatically use the information effectively. Another way to say this is that we see, hear, and feel those things that provide us with the necessary information to make the correct choices enabling us to have the best performance possible. We attend to those things that contribute and ignore those things that do not.

**Cue Words:**

Athletes have found that using attentional cue-words can increase their ability to concentrate. A cue word is a word or phrase you choose to repeat to yourself that reminds you of something. In this case, it is to do something, to focus, to eliminate distraction. One of the means of self-help is to pick a portion of your performance where you need to be focused on a particular moment to be successful. Then find a phrase or word that “triggers” the desired concentration state for you. You can then use your cue word as you are preparing for a practice or competition; rehearsing it many times in practice until it becomes a natural part of your competition routine.

Your cue words can also be more globally applicable. Remember, these performance skills are life skills; they are useful for everything that uses cognition. For instance, if you find your mind wandering, another cue word that can bring you back to attending might simply be “focus”. You can experiment with different cues and triggers that help you maintain a general focus or help you to concentrate on a specific movement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample ski cue words:</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Outside</th>
<th>Drive</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Hands Up</td>
<td>Forward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early</td>
<td>Look Ahead</td>
<td>Set Up</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Cue Words that I will use:

1)________________

2)________________

3)________________

4)________________

**Types of Focus:**

Sport psychologist Bob Niedeffer recognized that concentrating effectively depends on both the demands of the sport, and the athlete’s attentional skills or style. Below is his model showing 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 what areas to improve on 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).

- **Width** (broad or narrow) refers to how many things you are paying attention to at once. When your attention is broad, you are attending to many things. When you have a narrow attentional focus, you are paying closer attention to one or a very few things. For skiers, racing down the mountain and being able to see changes in the course conditions and adjusting to them takes broad attention. Standing in the start gate and looking where you want to make your first turn takes narrow focus of attention.

- **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 gymnast visualizing their floor routine in their head has internal focus. A quarterback in football anticipating a blitz from the defense prior to the play has external focus.

These two dimensions are somewhat different. The width dimension is on a continuum, while the direction dimension is either or. You cannot be half-internal, half-external in your attention’s direction.

**Broad examples include:**
- Taking in the vista of the entire run as it cascades down the mountain
- “TV” vision where you take in all the visual and auditory information of the environment
- Wide angle lens
- Closing your eyes to hear all of the sounds in the environment
- A quarterback or point guard seeing the entire field of play

**Narrow examples include:**
- A close up shot
- Focus on just the bar in a high jump
- Looking at only the rim in basketball
- Leading the chosen receiver just right on a long, deep pass

The model below describes in more detail how the two dimensions interact, while also providing the advantages and disadvantages of each type of attentional focus.

- **Internal**

  A **Broad-Internal** focus is good for dealing with a lot of information at the same time. This type of attention is essential for developing a game or run strategy. Mistakes are usually due to over-analysis. An athlete thinks too much about the wrong, task-irrelevant things.

  A **Narrow-Internal** focus is good for looking in on a single thought or word. This type of attentional focus is essential for body awareness, arousal regulation, and mental imagery. Mistakes are usually due to choking; athletes become distracted by internal states, they become inflexible and lock up their concentration.
• **External**

A *Broad-External* focus is used to assess the total environment. This type of focus is good for quickly assessing the situation at hand. Essential for being aware of all cues in the environment, mistakes are usually due to paying attention to irrelevant and/or distracting cues.

A *Narrow-External* focus is used for single object focus and is good for looking in on a single thought or word. Essential for blocking out distractions, mistakes are usually due to athletes becoming too narrow in their focus, thereby missing vital cues.

To make use of the information in this model, first you must determine which of these four attentional styles is a strength 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 others. Some athletes may be somewhat skilled in all dimensions.