



Developing Your Mental Game

Monday 22nd April 2019

The Zone

Each time Sarah stepped onto the track she and her competitors sensed she was “different”. But they couldn’t put their finger on why.

Just moments before, it seemed to others that Sarah was on holiday with friends rather than at her age group national championships. Whilst they were all feeling the nerves, Sarah just seemed to be taking it in her stride.

That changed quickly when she stepped onto the track.

Sarah would describe to me later how her relaxation before the big race changes to butterflies in her tummy, a sign for Sarah that she was excited and her body was ready to race.

She described how the very act of putting her running shoes on, tying her laces and walking down to the track was part of her “mental game”.

This was a period which Sarah saw as an opportunity to get herself ready for the upcoming race. An opportunity to get in the zone.

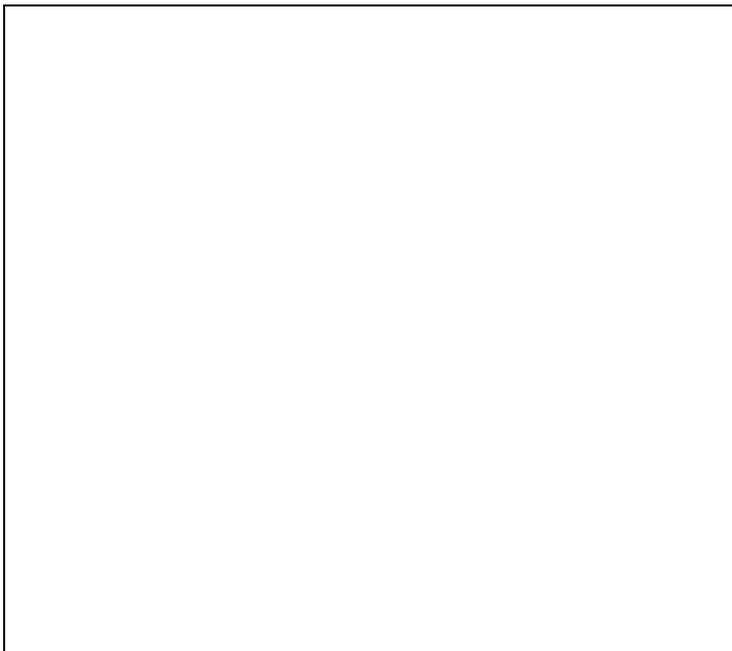
Sarah described how she’d spend this time recalling all the other big events she’d performed well at, remembering all the tough training sessions that have helped prepare her for this event and repeating her favourite mantra to herself: “smooth and steady wins the race”.

For Sarah, this combination was her mental game for competition. It was her response to a simple question:

In order to perform at your best, what have you done or thought about that's helped you get in the zone?

It was Sarah's use of imagery and self-talk that helped her create her laser focus and cool calmness that the other competitors noticed about Sarah, albeit without being able to describe it.

Using the box below, write down your own answer to the question. Add as much detail as possible.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student to write their own answer to the question above.

I just visualised then executed my plan

Using the Mind's Eye

Imagery (aka visualisation) is a mental skill used by loads of athletes to help them develop, motivate themselves, plan for an upcoming event, manage pressure situations and even help them recover from injury.



Many of us use imagery without even knowing we're doing it. For example, how many windows does your house have? To answer this we create a mental image in our head of our house and walk around it, counting them. That's imagery.

In sport, good imagery has the following elements to it:

- It is as **vivid** as possible (e.g. a swimmer may imagine the *feel* of the water and *sound* of the crowd (and more) whilst a footballer may imagine the *smell* of the grass and the *feeling* of tired legs (and more))
- It is **controllable** (e.g. a swimmer may imagine executing good turns in a big final whilst a footballer may imagine taking his time before taking a penalty kick and scoring)

Importantly, imagery is a skill and it can be learned and developed. So if you feel your imagery is not vivid or controllable, you can work on it.

Try and use imagery at least 3 times per week for 5 – 10 minutes. Perhaps you could imagine performing well at an upcoming competition, refining a particular skill you're working on or to review your performance at training to identify how you may have done things differently.

Here's a generic imagery script that you could use to get you started. An idea may be to record yourself reading it out loud then listen back to it. If you find it useful, you could adapt it to better suit your own circumstances as you get use to it.

"Imagine it's an hour before you compete at an important event. The butterflies are in your tummy but you see these as a sign that you're ready. Imagine yourself going through your usual preparations before you perform... Try and imagine what the environment around you is like... Who else can you see, if anyone?... What are you doing? What else is around you as you prepare?... Notice that you feel ready and eager to execute what you've been practicing in training....

It's time to start. As you wait for things to kick off, imagine yourself running through your game plan in your head... What are some of the words that you are saying to yourself in this moment? Notice that it makes you feel focused on the task at hand.

With things now under way, imagine yourself performing well... Imagine how the parts of your body are feeling as you successfully execute what you planned to do.... Even when you make a mistake, imagine taking it in your stride and not getting too bothered by it, instead re-focusing and recovering well....

And that's it. Imagine how it feels when you finish. You've put in an excellent performance and you know it.... See if you can imagine how that would feel. Perhaps you can hear other people cheering?"

Self-Talk: Your Inner Chatter Box

Simply put, self-talk is anything you think to yourself.

Sometimes that chatter may be **helpful**, boosting your sense of confidence, focus and motivation.

But other times it can be **unhelpful**, draining you of any confidence, creating a sense of worry and driving you to focus on things that are not relevant.

Crucially though, there is a link between our thoughts, our feelings and how we act. Try it. Using imagery, see if you can *recall your greatest ever performance* in your sport. Make it really detailed and vivid.

How do you feel when you think of this performance? How might that help you in your next event?

So a good mental game is one that has helpful self-talk.

To develop this:

1. Trying to spot unhelpful thoughts that drain the energy from you
2. Ask yourself: what would be a more helpful thought?
3. ...Now tell yourself that!

The next page has a worksheet to get you started with this simple process.

I talk to myself... especially when I'm in training and I don't want to do it anymore, I say 'If you wanna be a champion you gotta go, get up'. I say 'You're gonna lose. You don't wanna lose. So let's finish this'.



Unhelpful Thought	→	Helpful Thought
He/she always beats me!	→	I'll do my best and learn from this game, no matter what
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	

Tracking Your Progress

Tracking the development of your mental game can be really simple.

All you need is:

1. A notes app on your phone (or notepad if you don't have a smartphone)
2. Your brain
3. An answer to the following question: **for your specific sport, what would a solid mental game consist of?**

And that's it.

Then all you do is rate your mental game (i.e. your answer to No. 3) after each training session and competition.

And to keep that simple, you could rate it as:

-  (excellent),
-  (did some of it) or
-  (did none of it)

Remember, rate your mental game after competition **and** training. Training gives you a great opportunity to develop your mental game rather than just “hoping” it'll be there for the competition!

The next page has a simple example from an athlete who trains 4 times per week and competes on the Saturday.

This example also includes a % score making it easier to track over the coming weeks.



Mental Game

Wk 8th April 2019

Mon 👍

Tue 😐

Wed 👍

Fri 👍

Sat 👊

👍 = 3 (60%)

😐 = 1 (20%)

👊 = 1 (20%)

Summary

- Imagery that is vivid and controllable can help your performances and development
- Imagery is a skill and, like all skills, gets better with practice
- Self-talk is the inner chatter in your own head. Sometimes it's helpful, sometimes it's not
- Practice noticing unhelpful thoughts and changing them to more helpful ones
- Keep track of your mental game by using your phone/notepad
- Practice your mental game in training and competition to better prepare you for the big events

Contact

If you would like to develop your mental game with Andy's help, you can contact him on:

07590 187014

andy@simplyperform.com

www.simplyperform.com