

Mental Game Must Be Refined With Mental Rehearsal

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Special To Collegiate Baseball

BURLINGTON, Vt. — Olympians, PGA members, Ultimate Fighting World Champions and elite level baseball players all use mental rehearsal as part of their conditioning and preparation program.

Unfortunately, many college and high school programs have not developed a consistent approach to maximizing their mental game through mental rehearsal.

Often left out of the preparation process, mental rehearsal, also known as visualization and imagery, can be one of the most important skills utilized to help you play your best when it means the most.

In this article, I will discuss the benefits of mental rehearsal and how, as a coach or player, you can start your own mental rehearsal program.

How Rehearsal Works

There is plenty of research in sport psychology that demonstrates the benefits of mental rehearsal. The reason why this type of training is beneficial is because the brain processes information that we physically do, and vividly imagine, with virtually the same neuromuscular pathways. What happens when we do mental rehearsal is that we are conditioning our bodies to better execute the images we see in our mind's eye.

If I were to ask you to close your eyes and as vividly and clearly as possible imagine grabbing a lemon wedge off the counter, raising it to your lips and taking a big bite out of that lemon, seeing and smelling the body and pulp of that

lemon, tasting the juices of the lemon, you would probably start to have a physiological response to a psychological stimulus.

If you have ever seen a scary movie and jumped out of your seat, you have experienced a physiological response to a psychological stimulus.

If you have experience *deja vu* or gotten excited at the thought of spending time with a member of the opposite sex, you have experienced a physiological response to a psychological stimulus, exactly the same type of response and benefits you get from doing mental rehearsal.

In baseball, the process is the same.

You will benefit greatly from consistent mental rehearsal.

Start to imagine yourself having quality at-bats and driving a good fastball out over the plate, into the opposite field gap for a double, and you increase your chances of executing that same scenario in a game.

"I remember an at-bat earlier this season against Mississippi State where we had done some mental rehearsal in the hotel before the game, and I saw myself really driving an inside fastball over the shortstop's head for an RBI single," said Vanderbilt catcher Shay Robin.

"Later that night in the game, the scenario came up and played out exactly as I had seen it in my mind earlier that day. It was a pretty cool experience."



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— *Brian Cain*

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images the color of the uniform the pitcher is wearing, the background you would see behind the pitcher.

The release point, the ball, contact with the pitch and the ball rocketing off of your barrel.

You would then want to see yourself making contact on the inside corner of first base with your right foot as you explode into second base, beating the throw with a good aggressive popup slide.

You would then want to build in the senses of sound and hear the ball hit the bat, hear your body slide aggressively into second base, hear the positive energy coming from the dugout and the crowd.

You would also want to build in the sense of smell and touch by feeling the ball make contact with

the bat and maybe smell the warm spring day or the smell of freshly cut grass or the BBQ behind the stadium.

Creating A Successful Stage

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I relate this to an athlete having to learn to deal with the distractions and pressures of playing in front of a hostile crowd or in a championship game where there are more distractions to deal with.

Athlete and coaches can often get hooked by distractions and things not relevant to them playing the next pitch in the present moment.

A great way to practice dealing with distractions is to build them into your mental rehearsal.

Building in distractions allows you to practice dealing with the distractions that will come up in a game.

Distraction control and present moment focus are skills that are necessary to playing the game one pitch at a time and are skills that need to be trained just like being able to drag bunt or execute a pitch out.

If you can learn to deal with distractions in a quite and comfortable environment, you will be able to learn to deal with distractions in a wild and crazy, chaotic environment.

Using Imagery When Injured

Having been a pitcher in college that spent the majority of his time in the training room and on the disabled list, I have found that utilizing mental rehearsal with athletes who are injured has tremendous benefits.

When you are injured and can not compete, often you get labeled with a red X, sit on the sidelines, watch practice and waste opportune time for mental rehearsal.

One athlete that made the most of his time on the disabled list this season was Pedro Alvarez, Vanderbilt's All-American third baseman and one of the top players

in the country.

Alvarez, broke his hand in the Commodores first game of the 2008 season against Oregon State and with the help of head coach Tim Corbin and hitting coach Eric Backitch was able to stay sharp by taking mental at-bats during games and by standing in to track pitches in the bullpen.

"I wasn't able to swing, but I was able to hold a bat," Alvarez said. "I would go to the bullpen and stand in when guys were pitching so I could track the ball and do as much physically as I could. I would then take a full swing in my mind and see myself making solid contact."

"I would do some one handed bunting and worked a lot on my base running, getting good reads off the bat and really worked hard to see the ball down in the dirt."

"During games I would visualize myself at the plate going pitch for pitch with the guy who was hitting in my normal spot in the line up."

"When I was cleared to swing, I felt like a lot of the rust most people experience coming off of an injury was gone."

"I felt like I was able to pick up where I had left off. I think that taking all those mental reps really helped me stay in the flow of the game so that I could come back from the hand injury and get back to my usual self more quickly."

Offensive Situations

Below is a sample list of offensive situations that you can use with your team to conduct your own mental rehearsal sessions. Remember to build in as many of the senses as you can.

Be sure to put the players through the following situations against both right- and left-handed pitchers.

1) Fastball away, double into opposite field gap, hard pop up slide into 2B.

2) Fastball in, double down the pull side foul line.

3) Runner at 1B, move them to third with base hit to right side.

4) Sacrifice bunts with runner at first and runner at second.

5) Suicide squeeze, get the bunt down.

6) Runner at 1B, hit and run.

7) Runner at 3B, drive the ball towards the middle of the infield to score the runner.

8) You are the base runner at 1B, read breaking ball down in the dirt, extend and advance to 2B on ball in dirt.

9) You are runner at 2B, score on a base hit through the infield, good hard slide into home plate.

10) You get a base hit through SS and 3B and are going hard the entire

way, making a good aggressive turn at 1B, putting pressure on LF, you are thinking 2B all the way and continue on to 2B beating the throw.

With mental rehearsal you can create any situation that you want to prepare your team for. The more detailed you can create each scenario, the more beneficial the mental rehearsal will be.

You can work in having the players see the coach giving signs from the third base coaching box and you can also have the players mentally rehearse going through their hitting routines and releasing their yellow lights and adversity such as an umpire making a bad

call or missing a fastball down the middle.

If you can condition your players to see it in their minds and see them respond in a manner that you would like to see, you will have a better chance of getting your players to respond that way on the field.

For a custom audio CD of a mental rehearsal for your program, please contact Brian M. Cain, MS, CAA - Peak Performance Coach by e-mail, brian@briancain.com. You can also find mental toughness training CDs and DVDs that you can use with your teams at www.briancain.com