



## **Mental Vision Gameplan Manual**

In order to create a consistent national “Mental Gameplan” that can be applied and taught to all levels of golfers within the GolfRSA system, we devised a “Mental Vision Gameplan”. This Vision is the starting point of informing players, coaches, administrators as well as parents what is implied when we discuss the “mental processes” that play a role in golf, as well as the techniques that we believe are important in developing world-class South African golfers.

Thus the GolfRSA National “Mental Vision Gameplan” is:

**“To create mentally tough athletes that perform under pressure on the local and world stage, through their values and those of GolfRSA, by utilising mental Processes, Routines, Techniques and Assessments that are well researched and cutting edge. And, in so doing, become and remain the top amateur golfing country in the world. While all the time instilling an attitude of Professionalism, Growth and Fun.”**

Based on this Vision we have designed this manual to assist players, coaches, administrators and parents to understand what is expected of players on a national level in terms of their mental processes and skills.

It also provides practical techniques that can be taught and applied on the practice mat so that every competitive golfer within the GolfRSA framework has a general set of processes and techniques that they can apply in competition and, in so doing, become better players, nationally and abroad.

The manual is set out according to the five mental processes and five techniques listed below. Although this is by no means an exhaustive list, it is a solid starting point from which to align national knowledge, learning and expectations as to what the “mental game” implies and requires.

Thus, each process and technique is discussed according to the when, where, how and why – so as to make it easy for the coach or parent to teach and of equal ease for the player to apply.

The structure of the manual is as follows:

### **5 Mental Processes to every shot:**

1. Decision Making
2. Pre-Shot Routine
3. Commitment
4. Acceptance
5. Body Language

**5 Mental Techniques every player can use:**

1. Imagery
2. Self-talk
3. Breathing
4. Triggers
5. Concentration

Lastly, it is our sincere hope and belief that this manual will be the starting point of making South Africa and GolfRSA the standard bearers in terms of the psychology of the game of golf. In so doing also elevate South African golf to the heights that we believe it, and ours players, can reach.

Yours in golf psychology,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Theo Bezuidenhout".

Theo Bezuidenhout  
GolfRSA Performance Psychologist



## Mental Processes To Every Shot

### **1. DECISION MAKING**

*"It's hard to come up with a technical formula for success. But I do know that to be successful at any level...you have to make good decisions" – Darren Clarke*

Decision-making is a process by which athletes settle ('decide'), based on their goal, on a particular course of action, considering the variables which could impact the results ('consequences') of that action. The words process, goal, action, variables and consequences are vital to the mental skill of decision-making and are elaborated on later.

#### **WHEN:**

Athletes make performance related decisions every day, often numerous times per day. Some decisions are **secondarily-related** to athletic performance (e.g. what must I eat, when must I go to bed, how often should I practice). Some decisions are **primarily-related** to athletic performance (e.g. what club should I use, how aggressive should I be with my approach, and what tempo should I set).

Thus, decision making is not confined to one particular time, but is practiced constantly. However, planning forms an essential part of effective decision making. Planning therefore is a process of pre-empted decision making done in preparation for a particular event (e.g. planning for a specific golf course, **planning** for a particular opponent). **Planning** is usually done prior to an event (e.g. the night before a training session, the week leading up to a specific event), and in many cases, becomes a strategy/game-plan. In this manual, the planning phase will also focus on a practical means of planning for every shot.

#### **WHERE:**

Given the regular nature of decision-making in performance, there is no specific place where decisions are made. Many **primarily-related** decisions are made on the field/in the action, whilst **secondarily-related** decisions are made on a constant basis in various settings (e.g. from the supermarket to the gym).

However, planning is usually done in prior to an event in a quiet place with few distractions. Planning also allows an athlete the opportunity to give themselves a rough guideline of when and where during competition will be best to make decisions (e.g. a golfer may decide to use time waiting for another player to hit a tee-shot as time to make several decisions, whilst a pre-shot routine could be a decided upon time to make further decisions).

#### **HOW:**

The concepts of **process, goal, action, variables** and **consequences** inform how we make both secondarily and primarily-related decisions:

### **Process**

Effective decision-making is a process which follows a fairly stable course. It is a process because it takes into consideration various factors before coming to a conclusion (e.g. what is my goal, what is the context, what have I planned). Once decision-making becomes 2<sup>nd</sup> nature to an athlete, the process will also automatically become ingrained and less of a conscious effort.

Thus, the decision will be made faster. Decisions made impulsively often have **not** taken all factors into consideration (i.e. have not followed the process) and are thus bound to miss some determining factor. An impulsive decision should not be confused with a fast decision—the latter being a skill, the prior a mistake.

### **Goal**

The process of decision-making starts with having a **goal/aim in mind**. Without a goal, there is no benchmark from which to decide whether or not a given decision is worthwhile or contributing to your goal (e.g. taking a risky shot into the green on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole, when your goal was simply to par the 18<sup>th</sup>, would be a poor decision).

### **Action**

Once you have made a decision, given you have followed the process of effective decision-making, **commit** to the action you have decided upon. Deciding to **commit** to an action is a vital decision in sport.

### **Variables**

Variables are the ever-changing aspects which affect your decision (e.g. your opponent, the weather, your ability, your form, your planning, your mental state, the context...). Effective decision-making takes all of these relevant variables into consideration. Different sports have different variables and therefore spending time planning is important to make sure you don't miss a variable.

### **Consequences**

All decisions we make have consequences. Consequences in this context don't necessarily mean negative. It simply means the effects/possible effects of a given action and decision. The process of decision-making must always take consequences into account (e.g. If I start with a quick tempo, what is likely to happen? If I select a given club, what is the likely outcome?). Consequences are measured against the backdrop of your goal.

### **WHY:**

Athletes make hundreds of decisions in every performance. Often these decisions are made without knowing how effective decisions are made on the field/in the game. Effective decision-making ("the thinking behind the game and your performance") leads to effective actions, and often has a calming result on our emotions.

## **DECISION MAKING PROCESS:**

An acronym that all golfers are able to use specifically related to decision making before a golf shot is **L.E.G.B.Y.S.** This acronym should be applied before every shot, before pulling a club out of your bag, and starting your Pre-shot routine. If applied properly, you will be able to make the best decision for each shot before execution.

### **L - Lie**

*Lie refers to the actual lie of the golf ball. Is the ball in the fairway, bunker, deep rough, behind a tree, a divot etc.?*

### **E - Elevation**

*Elevation refers specifically to the relationship between your ball and target in terms of being above or below one's ball. A target above your ball may imply selecting extra club, and vice versa if target is below your ball.*

### **G - Gradient**

*Gradient refers to the lie of the golf ball relevant to gradient of slope it may be on. Depending if ball is on an uphill or downhill lie, this will affect stance, weight distribution and club selection of what shot to play.*

### **B - Best Miss**

*Best miss can be described as a selection of a shot, that if not executed 100%, the result would still leave your ball in a position to complete the hole effectively. An example may include going for a green with water on the left, and pin positioning is also back left. Best miss in this case is hitting middle of the green, and two putting, rather than attacking the pin, and potentially landing in the water.*

### **Y - Yardage**

*Yardage, refers simply to the distance of your ball from targets, hazards and landmarks on each hole. Yardage is the most important factor to consider for club selection.*

### **S - Shape**

*Shape, refers to the shape of shot that would best suit the current hole, and yield the best outcome. Examples include, a draw, a fade, a punch, a hook etc.*

## **2. PRE-SHOT ROUTINE**

*“The most important part of your routine is the commitment it produces. By commitment I mean the complete absence of doubt about the shot you have planned and the club you’re using.”* - Bob Rotella, golf psychologist to numerous PGA Pros.

### **PRE-SHOT ROUTINE:**

The repetition of a set of logical steps or actions, that prepare you **MENTALLY** and **PHYSICALLY** to commit to, and execute, a sporting movement e.g. Driving a ball.

### **WHEN & WHERE:**

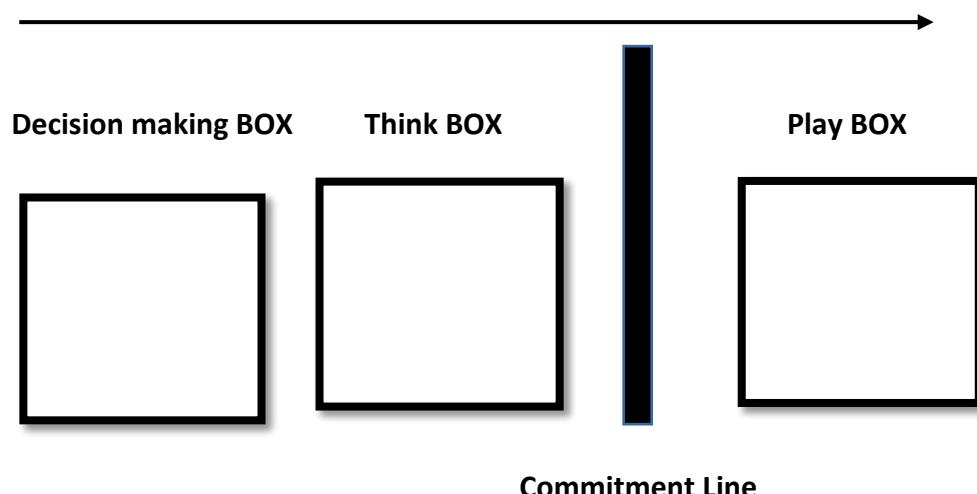
A pre-shot routine is used in the moments prior to hitting a shot. Routines are most important for competition and performances and are used here consistently, however routines should be practiced thoroughly during training (e.g. The driving range, the putting green, the chipping green).

The effective practice of these routines during training is essential to effectively use them during competition. However, players should not be expected to commit to a full routine whilst working out a technical flaw with their coaches on the range, but a portion of all practice time should be committed to practicing the mental and physical steps of your routine.

It is a common misconception that Pre-Shot Routines are only used on the course - the practice and refinement of such routines on a daily basis are vital. This in turn will allow the mental and physical steps of every routine to be ingrained as a habit for each player, thus allowing clearer and better ‘access’ to such routines under times of pressure.

### **HOW:**

In order to fully understand the **HOW** of a Pre-Shot Routine, we must first understand the basic process of it. Let’s take a look at the diagram below as adapted from VISION54 ([www.vision54.com](http://www.vision54.com))



### ***DECISION MAKING BOX***

(NB - See previous chapter: Decision Making)

In the **DECISION-MAKING BOX**, the athlete has reached his/her ball and has placed his/her bag a comfortable distance away from his/her ball. During this time, the athlete will now use the acronym **L.E.G.B.Y.S** to effectively make the most informed decision on club and shot selection. The athlete will then pull a club from his/her bag or be handed a club by their caddie, and proceed to step into the '**THINK BOX**'.

### **THINK BOX**

The '**THINK BOX**' is characterised by a few basic points. Once in the '**THINK BOX**', the athlete

- Starts with a drill swing or swing feel (as a technical reminder of something worked on by their coach and themselves).
- Next, the athlete will make a full practice swing, exactly as they are going to make.
- The athlete will then stand directly behind the ball, align him/herself with the target.
- After alignment behind the ball, the athlete then uses the mental skill of Imagery/Visualisation to imagine the shot they are attempting to hit.
- Once he/she has imagined the shot, the athlete makes a purposeful step over an illusory '**COMMITMENT LINE**' into the '**PLAY BOX**'.

### **COMMITMENT LINE**

The '**COMMITMENT LINE**' represents a purposeful transition from the '**THINK BOX**' to the '**PLAY BOX**'. Once the commitment line is crossed, the athlete must fully trust and commit to the **Decisions made**, and the **Action** they are about to perform (Hesitation in competition can cost you greatly).

### **PLAY BOX**

The '**PLAY BOX**' is a box where:

- The focus is predominantly on the target and the type of shot chosen.
- Focus is on Imagery (all 5 senses) experienced in the 'Think Box'.
- Step over the ball, and think ONLY of target.
- Look at the target once or twice (last look to be a long look).
- NO TECHNICAL THINKING
- Pull the trigger.

### **PRINCIPLES OF A POLISHED, PRACTICED AND PERFECTED PRE-SHOT ROUTINE:**

- Keep it simple
- Keep it short (+/- 30sec)
- Don't mix up focus points during different parts of the routine.
- Have your own routine – try not copy somebody else's.
- Any INTERRUPTIONS = Re-set.
- Use Imagery (all 5 senses), not just visualisation (just seeing the shot).
- Practice with a 'Commitment Line' between 'Think Box' and 'Play Box' (use an alignment stick or club during practice).
- When over the ball, focus on target, and then start to zone in on the ball.
- Pre-Shot routine is the start of every shot – Start Well!!!
- If you are not committed to the shot, then DO NOT HIT THE SHOT!!!

### **WHY:**

We have several routines in golf, due to the fact that golf shots are made up of different mental and physical steps which we know executed well will result in great play/good execution. However, when athletes are under pressure, their routines are often the first thing they do not do thoroughly.

Committing consistently to your routines is vital in dealing with high pressured situations, and putting the foundation in place of any good shot. See routines as your safety net - the thing you can do to help you play great, no matter what situation you are in or who you are playing against.

A Pre-Shot Routine is essentially a **Trigger** that helps players 're-set' mentally. After either a good/bad shot, players experience a variety of positive and negative emotions both of which can be very distracting and proceed to take us away from the present moment. A solid Pre-Shot Routine will wipe the slate clean, providing a 'neutral' foundation from which to play every new shot, regardless of what has come before.

Finally, a well-designed routine allows the players body to essentially take over - leading to automated execution being the prime element in their shot.

### **PRACTICAL TIPS:**

1. Use the guidelines above to design your own Pre-Shot Routine.
2. Once you have worked on the range to construct your own Pre-Shot Routine that works for you, start practicing it regularly to make it a **habit**, part of every shot you play. If you are struggling to remember the steps (both mental & physical), write them down on a piece of paper, put it somewhere visible whilst practicing on the range and use it as a reminder until you are comfortable.
3. Have yourself **videotaped** on the range/course over several shots. Identify the inconsistencies in your routine (both physical & mental). Go about correcting these.
4. Start incorporating effective **Breathing**, and effective **Imagery** into your routine.
5. Be careful not to simply '**go through the motions**' with your routine - every action must have meaning and be done for a reason.
6. Commit to setting **20 balls** aside each day at the end of practice where you do your full Pre-Shot Routine. Adapt it if necessary as your game develops.

## **3. COMMITMENT**

*"What's the difference between the pig's relationship to your bacon and egg breakfast and the chicken's relationship to it? The chicken is involved in it, the pig is committed to it" – Dr Bob Rotella, sport psychologist.*

Once you have effectively made decisions, committing to these decisions ensures confidence, decisiveness and no hesitation. Decisions made in the right manner are essential parts of performance. Trusting the process of making that decision is essential.

### **WHEN:**

Although commitment is most applicable **during performance** (e.g. on the golf course; in the boxing ring; on the rugby field), when experiences such as emotions and thoughts need

to be managed effectively for optimal performance, commitment needs to be utilized consistently.

Commitment in practice is just as important, as is commitment to practice. An athlete needs to commit to practicing on the times they have set out for themselves. Within this, an athlete needs to commit to decisions and techniques whilst practicing in order to familiarize themselves with certain practices and routines.

#### **WHERE:**

Commitment can be applied everywhere. In this particular manual, commitment refers specifically to the moments leading up to playing a shot. In other words, commitment can be seen to be an important factor regarding the decision-making process in the 'Decision making BOX', as well as the separation between the 'Think BOX' and the 'Play BOX'.

Separation of the two boxes allows for a purposeful transition from a cognitive process in the 'Think BOX', to the 'Play BOX' where your mind and body will be quieter, freeing it up from unwanted tension, and placing yourself in the best possible position for effective execution of the shot.

#### **HOW:**

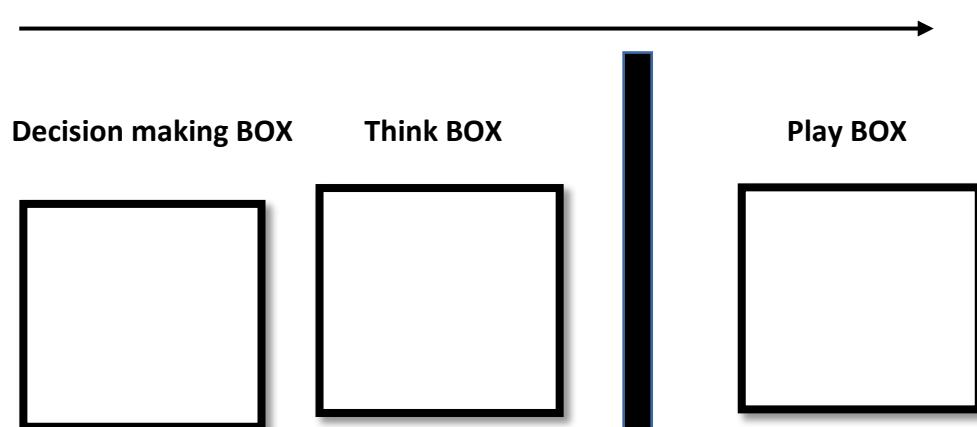
##### ***Commitment to your decisions***

Once you have effectively made decisions in the 'Decision Making BOX' (**See: Decision-making theme**), committing to these decisions ensures confidence, decisiveness and no hesitation. Decisions made in the right manner are essential parts of performance.

Trusting the process of making that decision is essential. This includes planning and strategy prior to an event. Execution of a game-plan requires full commitment to that game-plan. Crucially, it also includes the L.E.G.B.Y.S acronym to be followed before each shot.

##### ***Commitment to your technique***

Your technique is something into which plenty of time and effort goes, so, when you are in competition/performing, commit to the actions that you have moulded alongside your coach. Hesitation in competition can cost you greatly. So, trust and commit to the action you perform.



## Commitment Line

### ***Crossing the Commitment Line***

Once you cross the commitment line from the 'Think BOX' to the 'Play BOX', it is imperative that you remain **committed** to four things, i.e.

- The *club* you have chosen
- The *shot* you are going to hit
- The *swing* you have chosen to use
- Your *ability* to execute the shot you have committed to

If you find that you are unable to commit to these four simple things, then "back out" of the shot, and start your pre-shot routine again. Commitment to these four things occur in the 'Think BOX', and once you feel confident in your choices made about the shot, make the commitment by stepping over the 'Commitment line' into the 'Play BOX', remaining committed throughout.

### **PRACTICAL DRILLS:**

Here are some practical drills that may help athletes with building their commitment and trust in their shots, and being able to incorporate it into their Pre-shot routines.

#### ***7 Second drill***

The idea here is that you have all the time you want to make a decision and imagine your shot, but all the decisions regarding the shot are made while you are standing behind the ball looking down the target line in your 'Think BOX'. Once you leave this area you are expected to commit to your decisions, and step into the 'Play BOX'.

**Here's the twist:** Once you leave the 'Think BOX' you only have seven seconds to hit the shot. If you take too long you have to start over. The idea here is to **complete the shot before you even have a chance to think** about negative outcomes or other swing thoughts. For many, this short time to execute the shot is enough to override the brains ability to bring up unnecessary and unwanted information, that may reduce your confidence and commitment to the shot.

#### ***Ready, Aim, Fire drill***

The same process occurs in your pre-shot routine, however:

1. Once you have finished analysing your shot and you're getting ready to leave the 'Think BOX', say out loud "Ready". This will affirm your commitment to the shot you've decided on.
2. When you leave the Think BOX' to address the ball say "Aim". This helps your brain become target oriented and further separate you from the previous analytical step which can lead to wavering.
3. The third step is to say "Fire" when you're hitting the ball. This is the last step which keeps your brain focused on execution during the shot process. Further blocking out other swing thoughts and negative targets/results.

## 4. ACCEPTANCE

*"The game was due to start in three hours, but there was every chance it might be delayed or interrupted. I didn't let that worry me. My mind was going to be clear and focussed this time, whatever happened. No distractions. I was not going to allow any room for a repeat of my failure of concentration in 2007." - Rafael Nadal*

Acceptance is an athlete's ability to **acknowledge, understand** and **allow** certain 'unpleasant' internal experiences (thoughts and emotions) to happen, in order to achieve their goals (e.g. anxiousness is recognised as a normal part of performing in a big competition and thus is tolerated as a part of the process, not targeted to control or avoid).

### WHEN:

Acceptance of 'unpleasant' internal experiences (thoughts and emotions) are most relevant when in competition or in a strenuous and important practice session.

#### *Example*

A golfer hits a poor shot and thus feels angry & frustrated; another consequence of this poor shot is self-doubt and negative thoughts such as 'I'm not good enough'. Unless the player accepts the poor shot (including the associated negative internal experiences it brings with it) as part of the game, and ultimately moves on, his focus will remain either on the past (i.e. I can't believe I hit such a stupid shot), or on the future (i.e. Now I have to make an extra birdie on the final hole to make up for that shot). This will ultimately distract him/her from **present-moment task orientated focus**.

#### *Acceptance, NOT approval*

Acceptance should remain a process for during competition and practice, in order to keep us focussed on the task we are busy with. However, it is vital to reflect on poor shots/performances in order to learn and grow from those experiences.

This reflection should take place at a time when thinking back and reflecting on such performances do not affect current tasks (e.g. when you are sitting with your coach after a competition; when you are lying in bed after a day's training). Acceptance does not mean that we approve of low standards and poor performances: it means accepting we cannot do a thing about what has already happened. What we do have a say in is what is happening right now.

With regards to playing a bad shot, it is the acceptance of the outcome of the shot that is vital, however that does not mean we approve of the shot.

### WHERE:

Similar to commitment, acceptance is typically a manner of approaching your game - it is not necessarily something you can just switch 'on' or 'off'. Thus, it is employed throughout practice and competition on the field. However, perfecting acceptance may require some off-field work:

### HOW:

Acceptance as a technique requires constant reflection: reflection on **why we practice it** and reflection on **our performances**:

Reflection on our poor performances allows us not to leave such performances lingering. Once an athlete is able to draw some sort of positive from his poor performance (at an appropriate time), the acceptance and moving on from that performance becomes easier. However, all athletes need to realise that **the time for such reflection is NOT during competition/training** when focus on the present moment task needs to take precedence.

#### **WHY:**

##### ***The paradoxical effect of controlling emotions and thoughts***

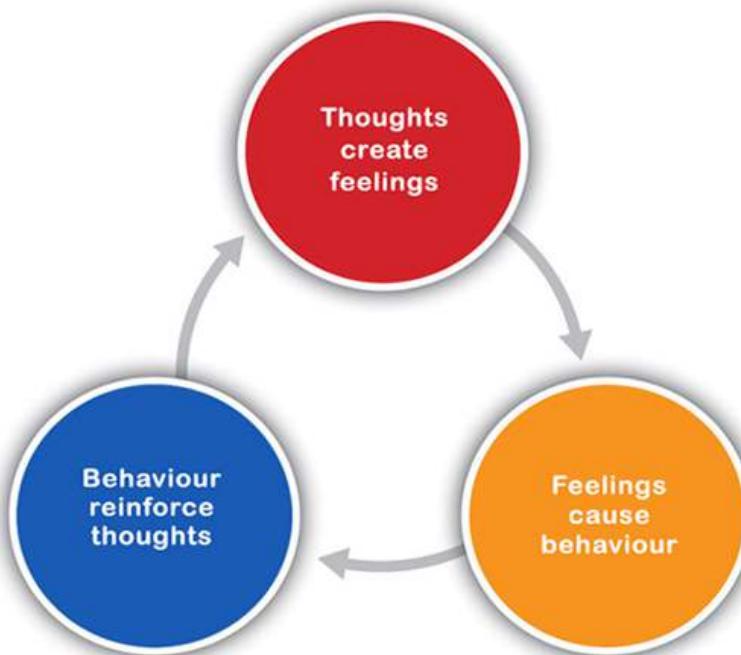
Strangely enough, the more athlete's attempt to control/eliminate their thoughts and emotions, seeking for the perfect conditions in which to perform, the more they focus on this elimination rather than on their actual performance. When a cricketer is facing a bowler bowling at 150km/hour, his performance would be much better served if he was focussing on the present moment/the task at hand (i.e. a ball travelling towards his head) rather than his emotions/thoughts. Unfortunately, when athletes believe they can control/eliminate such internal experiences, they constantly seek for such experiences in order to control them, and thus actually engage less actively with their sport. ***Ironic hey?***

The definition of mental toughness, and emotional intelligence (contextual definition), both of which have become synonymous with the world's best athletes, sheds light onto the reason why acceptance has become such a key term in high performance sport.

**Mental toughness:** An athlete's ability to focus on a task despite numerous internal experiences (e.g. negative thoughts and/or emotions).

**Emotional intelligence:** the ability of an athlete to react to their internal experiences (thoughts & emotions) in such a way that serves their values and associated goals.

Once an athlete can convince himself/herself of the irrationality of a focus on thoughts and emotions at the expense of the task they are involved in, acceptance of human performance as an imperfect practice becomes easier.



Let's reflect on the above diagram:

If we were to listen to what our minds are telling us at all times in performance, then we would never overcome a bad start; or play when the weather wasn't perfect; or fight back when our opponent was on top; or perform despite the fact that we didn't sleep well. This is because all of these situations would leave us with fear, frustration, doubt, negativity, irritation and even tiredness. Thus, our minds, in trying to protect us from an uncomfortable experience would say: "let's leave it for another day!"

The above diagram illustrates the impact that thoughts and emotions have on an athlete's behaviour and ultimately how successful they will perform in their sport.

The other notable thing is that thoughts, emotions and behaviour constantly reinforce one another. For example, the more indecisively you act on the course, the more you will experience emotions such as doubt and fear, and the more your thinking patterns will suggest you are incapable of performing well. Thus, as a way of managing the effects of emotions and thoughts on our performance, acceptance interprets emotions and thoughts as a **normal** and natural part of performance.

#### **PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

The practice of mindfulness (being mindful of internal experiences that the athlete may be experiencing) and acceptance are one and the same. The following exercises allow the athlete to become more comfortable with accepting any thoughts and emotions as a normal part of an experience. Once they are comfortable with these activities, the same principles start applying to their practice and competition.

#### ***Focus on single object***

One of the biggest hurdles to mindfulness is the experience of your attention wandering from one thought to the next. The result is feeling lost, anxious, or overwhelmed. You are

unfocused in these moments. The purpose of this exercise is to train yourself to focus your attention on a single object that you are observing.

Thus, begin by sitting comfortably in a place where you will be undisturbed. Choose an object to focus on (e.g. golf ball) and, without touching it, begin looking at the object with mindful awareness. Take your time to notice all aspects of this object: shape, texture, colour, etc. Now, hold it in your hand and notice the different ways that it feels. If your attention wanders during this exercise, gently bring your focus back to the object. When your mind wanders, accept the fact that that is normal, and gently bring your mind back to focusing on the object. By being mindful of your thought and emotions, you are able to accept them as normal, and non-threatening, and return them to focusing on the task at hand.

### ***Focus on a single minute***

This is a simple concept that can have a powerful impact. The purpose of this exercise is to help you become more aware of your internal sense of time. Many of us have the sensation that time passes very quickly, resulting in the desire to rush to “get things done.” When you are always focused on the next thing to do, you lose sight of the present moment. Others have the sense of time passing very slowly, which may result in the sense that you have more time than you actually do. Find a comfortable place to sit where you will be undisturbed. Begin timing yourself with a watch or timer. Now, without looking at the timer, simply sit. When you believe one minute has passed, stop the timer. Notice how much time has *actually* passed.

### ***Washing dishes mindfully***

While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes, one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes. At first glance, that might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on a simple thing? But that’s precisely the point.

The fact that I am standing there and washing these bowls is a wondrous reality. I’m being completely myself, following my breath, conscious of my presence, and conscious of my thoughts and actions. Through being aware of my thoughts and actions, I am able to remain in the present.

While washing dishes, you might be thinking about going to the range afterwards, and so try to get them out of the way as quickly as possible in order to go to the driving range. But that means that you are incapable of living during the time you are washing the dishes. When you are washing the dishes, washing the dishes must be the most important thing in your life. Just as when you’re at the range, your practice must be the most important thing in your life.

Initially you will struggle to remain present in the moment of doing something simple such as washing dishes. Your thoughts and emotions will move away from washing dishes. It is up to the person to become aware that their mind has wandered away from the task at hand, and gently bring yourself back to the present moment of washing dishes. If you do not remain in the present, our thoughts will always be on the past, or present.

The act of bringing your thoughts and emotions back to the present moment, i.e. washing dishes, is exactly the process of accepting your thoughts and emotions at that moment in order to return to the present.

The best time to be accepting on the golf course in a shot, is when you hit a bad shot. Hitting a bad shot will naturally lead to thoughts such as how did that happen? (past), or Now I need to make birdie on the next hole (future). By being mindful, you will be able to become aware of such thinking, and **accept** the thoughts as normal, in order to return to the present moment, and give all your focus to the task at hand.

\*Do some of the exercises with the athlete, but also give one or two of them for the athlete to take home and practice in their own time.

## **5. BODY LANGUAGE**

*"The simple act of wrapping his bandana is so frighteningly intense; his eyes, far away, seem to see nothing that's around him. Then suddenly, he'll breathe deep and kick into life, pumping his legs up and down and then, as if oblivious to the fact that his rival is just a few paces away across the room, he'll let out a cry of 'Vamos! Vamos'... the other player may be thinking his own thoughts but he won't be able to help casting him a wary sideways glance ... the effect Nadal had [has] before the match had [has] to be intimidating"- Francois Roig, Rafael Nadal's second coach.*

Body language is an athlete's non-verbal communication, made up of gestures, eye movements, body postures, and facial expressions. Humans send and interpret body language mostly without conscious effort.

### ***Non-verbal communication***

Communication which does not involve spoken words. Anything between approximately 60-70% of all communication between humans is non-verbal. Have you ever spoken over the phone and not known what people really meant? This is because the nonverbal gestures, eye movements, body postures, and facial expressions create a context for understanding. You can communicate a lot without ever saying a word.

### ***Gestures***

These include hand and body movements such as shaking of the head, throwing the hands up in exclamation, kicking, waving, fist pumping etc...

### ***Eye movements***

This can include rolling of the eyes, closing of the eyes, intense focussing of the eyes etc...

### ***Body posture***

This includes the actual position/stance of the body such as slouching or standing up straight etc...

### ***Facial expressions***

These include movements of the facial muscles, from clinching the cheeks, to pouting the mouth etc...

### **WHEN:**

Body language is constantly expressed. Even a complete 'lack' of body language can be considered a type of body language and can communicate plenty. Athletes in particular, given the fact that they are constantly being observed (by parents, spectators, opponents, officials) need to be aware of their body language, what such body language is communicating, and the effect of this type of communication on those around them, as well as on themselves.

### **WHERE:**

Again, body language is constantly expressed which means it is expressed everywhere. The most crucial times/places to be aware of one's body language is when competing. It's probably ok to take a few minutes to 'sulk' about a poor performance or a poor shot privately (and thus show appropriate body language such as shaking of the head, waving of the arms etc...), yet to do this in front of opponents leaves them with the 'one-up effect'.

### **HOW:**

#### ***Become aware of your body language you tend to express when you are performing***

Reflect on some of your performances and ask a few people who often watch you perform and practice in order to start becoming aware of the 'subconscious' expressions which you communicate on the field.

#### ***Become aware of what certain types of body language communicates***

Reflect on what you do when you are frustrated, angry, irritated, happy, excited, anxious, nervous etc. What are those gestures, postures and movements communicating to your opponents and what are they **reinforcing** with yourself?

#### ***Consciously 'Practice' positive body language***

Once you have become aware of your own body language, it needs to be a conscious effort from your side to adjust/alter your body language. Ways to help you do this involves:

- Communicating your willingness to change your body language to coaches, parents and mentors who can then act as timely reminders
- Keeping an index card detailing positive body language in your tog bag/golf bag
- Constantly reflecting on performances and body language
- Practicing positive body language during training sessions to make them become more automatic habits

### **WHY:**

There are several reasons as to why becoming aware and consciously making an effort to alter your body language is important:

#### **'One-up effect'**

This occurs when an athlete feels more in control/confident/able due to the fact that their opponent's body language is communicating failure/disappointment/lack of motivation. Psychologically the 'one-up effect' can be a huge boost to any athlete as they tend to thrive on their opponent's moment of weakness. They become encouraged by their opponent's discouragement, expressed through their body language.

### ***Body language affects your thoughts and emotions and performance***

Body language communicates thoughts and emotions and thus is a good insight into an athlete's experience at that specific moment. Given the fact that thoughts, emotions and behaviour are so intricately linked, one's own body language not only has a '**one up effect**', but can also **reinforce an athlete's own negative thoughts and emotions** surrounding a specific event (becoming a self-reinforcing spiral of negativity and poor self-belief) (e.g. when an athlete's body language communicates that they are frustrated and irritated with their performance, their emotions and further thoughts will continue to follow in the same vein). When an athlete enters into a time in a competition where they are experiencing negative thoughts and negative emotions, the resultant play is most like going to be negative from that point onwards. The opposite is however true. Positive body language, leads to positive thoughts and emotions, resulting in a positive style of play.

### ***Intimidation***

Positive body language which communicates attributes such as confidence, motivation, focus, decisiveness etc, are intimidating for any opponent. Alongside this, an athlete's ability to alter and control their body language after a poor performance/ act illustrates great resilience to their opponents.

## **GOLFRSA** **Mental Techniques Every Player Can Use**

### **1. IMAGERY**

*"I know that I have sometimes concentrated so hard on the shot that I was going to hit that I honestly felt that the shot could not fail to come off exactly as I had intended. On those occasions, I had the definite sensation that I had really hit the shot before I even started my club back." – Ben Hogan*

Imagery is the utilisation of your 5 senses (smell, hearing, touch, sight, and taste) to generate a life-like sport-specific experience in your mind.

#### **WHEN:**

Imagery can be done before (e.g. the evening before an important round of golf), during (e.g. between shots, as part of a pre-shot routine) and after (e.g. after having played a round when reflecting on the days play) competition and practice.

#### **WHERE:**

Imagery can be done anywhere. Imagery before and after competition or practice are more successful in a quiet peaceful environment in which the lack of distractions can lead to a far more realistic experience. However, as imagery is also a vital tool for during competition and practice, a quiet peaceful environment is not always a reality.

In this case remember, practice makes perfect: the more you can practice imagery during practice (e.g. as part of pre-shot routine before each shot), the more efficient you will be when it comes to doing this in competition.

## HOW:

Through deep breathing, and mindfulness, take a few moments to become as relaxed as possible. To keep distractions to a minimum you can close your eyes (this is not always the case as when you are doing imagery during competition/practice, the actual sight of the field, course, or opponent in front of you can aid in generating a controllable image). Once relaxed, start to generate an experience in your mind. This can be done in two different ways:

**Player Imagery (internal):** the image generated is from the perspective of a player, actively involved in the experience (e.g. actually imagine yourself holding the club or hitting the ball, as if looking through your own eyes; from an internal position).

**Spectator Imagery (external):** the image you generate is from the perspective of a spectator watching you perform; from an outsider perspective (e.g. your image should be seen from the position of sitting in the stands and watching yourself play; from an external position).

Work through the experience in your mind, paying specific attention at independent times to what you **see, feel, taste, smell, and hear** within the experience. Imagine the experience in as great a detail as possible. This will result in a most life-like experience (e.g. Imagine yourself on the first tee, feel the slight breeze and warm sunshine on your face, feel the grip of the club against your palm, see the green and the various spectators, see the ball travel after playing the shot, see it land, smell the freshly cut grass, taste the energy drink you just sipped, hear the sounds of birds and the silence of the 1<sup>st</sup> tee, hear the roar of an appreciative crowd after pulling off a good shot). Imagine the entire experience from start to finish.

Successful Imagery further needs to emphasize the following two principles:

### **Principle 1: Be in charge**

You need to be in charge of your image you generate. You need to control the type of image you want to create, being able to change different scenarios from bad to good, from losing to winning. Such mental mastery is an essential component of the athletic mastery you aim for on the field or on the course.

### **Principle 2: Emphasize precision**

Using all five of your senses improves the intensity of the image you generate, thus making the experience of imagery as realistic and close to the 'real thing' as possible. **Ask yourself:** What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you taste? What do you feel? Initially focussing on one of these senses at a time before combining them into a complete sensual experience allows you to be precise in the contribution of that particular sense to your experience.

## WHY:

Similar to the experience of a dream (e.g. a life-like nightmare causes you to wake up in a cold sweat with your heart pounding), effective imagery stimulates the same electrical stimulation from your brain to your various muscles, illustrating that **your brain seldom**

**differentiates between an imagined experience and reality.** Thus, athletes are able to 'practice' given experiences in their minds. This mental 'practice' (similar to a rehearsal) allows an athlete to:

**Improve confidence:** The psychological nature of high quality practice of a specific skill which improves an athlete's ability is that it invariably improves confidence for that skill.

**Conduct Performance analysis:** Attempting to master and improve a specific skill/shot/play/strategy entails improvement after adjustment. Imagery allows the mental analysis/recognition and consequent adjustment of a specific skill/shot/play/strategy. Therefore, imagery is often used after competition/practice as a tool for analysing performance and technique.

**Preparation:** Not only is imagery a vital facet of any pre-shot/pre-game/pre-match routine, it also allows for the sequencing of events in one mind, thus leaving an athlete with a sense of acquaintance with what is to come.

**Familiarity:** Possibly the most important benefit of practising imagery is the familiarity of the experience it creates for an athlete. This allows an athlete who is able to create an automated response to different situations, work through specific challenges (e.g. such as a specific shot/ specific opponent), and manage reactions to difficult emotions/situations.

**Injury rehabilitation:** The power of imagery extends to recovery, given not only the muscle stimulation synonymous with effective imagery, but also the aspects of mental 'practice'.

### **PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

Do the power of Imagery exercise:

Sit/lie comfortably, close your eyes and take a minute to regulate your breathing. Focus on taking deep, slow breaths, in through your nose and out through the mouth. Imagine yourself on the day of a big tournament/game. Take the client through his/her sport specific experience, working through each different sense. Allow them to generate each experience through that sense, by asking what do they smell, see, hear, taste, and feel? Make sure that they are precise and not rushed or too relaxed. Be careful not to skip out certain facets of your experience simply to finish the activity. Rather be extra specific

**Example:** *You stand on the first tee one minute before your scheduled tee-off time. There is a very slight breeze blowing and warm sunshine causes a drop of sweat to form on your forehead, just below your cap. Your muscles feel warm after your warm up, and you can smell the sunscreen (it reminds you of the beach). This smell is offset by the smell of freshly cut grass-a so unique to the golf course. As you drink from your juice bottle, you taste the sweetness of your berry flavoured energy drink as the cold liquid fills your mouth. You see a generous crowd of people who have gathered by the tee box, among them your family who have come with to support you. You notice your dad in and amongst the faces-his warm smile gives you a sense of ease, which helps balance out the feeling of butterfly's in your stomach. You turn towards your golf bag, where your caddie passes you your driver, as you indicate with a slight gesture of your hand. You feel the grip of the club against your palm, and as you look up to see the fairway, you take a practice swing-the swoosh of the club is the most notable sound you hear, even though there is a slight murmur from the crowd. Your*

*reach into your pocket where you feel the rough exterior of your golf ball and the sharp edge of your peg. As you stretch down to tee your ball, you hear as the crowd silences. There is a deathly silence as you go through your pre-shot routine, focussing intently on your alignment. As you step up to the ball, the warm sunshine lets up as the breeze intensifies just slightly. You strike a perfect draw, and as the custom sound of your club against the ball fills the air, there is cheer from the crowd. The club feels sweaty against your palm as you hand it over to your caddie.*

*“Before every shot I go to the movies inside my head. Here’s what I see. First, I see the ball where I want it to finish in a specific small area or fairway or green. Next, I see the ball going there—its path, trajectory, and behaviour on landing. Finally, I see myself making the kind of swing that will turn the first two images into reality. These ‘home movies’ are a key to my concentration and to my positive approach to every shot.” (Jack Nicklaus, 1976).*

## **2. SELF-TALK**

*“The first and last voice you hear [is]...the voice inside your head, the voice with which you talk to yourself. Remember...if you’re telling yourself you’re lousy, [you] are going to accept this as true...talking to yourself that way is like filling a trash bag full of garbage and carrying it over your shoulder while you play” – Dr Bob Rotella, sport psychologist*

Self-talk is the internal conversation an athlete has with themselves. Self-talk is sometimes expressed externally (by actually speaking out loud) and is sometimes expressed only internally (what an athlete ‘says’ to themselves in their heads).

Talking (whether internally or externally) is a **cognitive (thinking)** process. This means that it is often either a result of/an influence on, how we feel (*emotions*) or what we do (*actions*). Emotions, actions, and thoughts are all influenced by the task/situation at hand, e.g. playing a golf shot. Therefore, becoming aware of our own self talk, and changing it to positively influence our emotions and ultimately our game is an essential skill.

### **TYPES OF SELF-TALK:**

#### ***Internal talk***

Self-talk which is not expressed verbally by speaking/whispering out loud, rather it is only available to an individual in their own minds. This is present in most performance situations even though we are not always aware of it.

#### ***External talk***

Self-talk which is expressed verbally by speaking/shouting/whispering.

#### ***Words of effect***

Self-talk as if you were a coach, which focuses more on technique (e.g. “focus on the ball”; “keep your head down”).

#### ***Words of affect***

Self-talk which focuses on emotion, to create the desired mood for optimal performance, e.g. “steady”; “breathe”; “relax”: Such words typically illicit an emotion/feeling for the person using them.

**WHEN:**

Self-talk is typically present in 2 scenarios:

**1. It often associates/can be used in the moments around or which make up an action**

In this case self-talk can be done before (e.g. as part of your pre-shot/pre-action routine you could use words such as “focus”; “breath”; “move”), during (e.g. you could use internal talk such as counting down to maintain your rhythm whilst hitting a golf ball; using words of affect such as “boom” whilst putting in a tackle in rugby) and after (e.g. after having performed an action to reinforce the action - “great shot”; or to combat negative thoughts and emotions after a poor performance/action –“move on”).

**2. It is present/can be used away from direct performance situations**

In this case self-talk can be used in preparation (e.g. to build confidence/concentration prior to a big event) or in reflecting on a performance (e.g. “great performance”; “tomorrow is another day”; “I was great today”).

**WHERE:**

Self-talk is present everywhere (in particular internal talk) and should be actively utilised anywhere. In particular, self-talk during competition has been proven to be effective, given athletes have practiced its use in training. In this case remember, practice makes perfect: the more you can practice self-talk during practice (e.g. as part of pre-shot routine before each shot), the more efficient you will be when it comes to doing this in competition.

**HOW:*****Become aware of what you saying to yourself***

First it is important to become aware of the self-talk which is already ongoing. Think back to previous performances (good and bad) and reflect on the self-talk which was present. Reflect also on the effect such self-talk had on your performance and your emotions. During one practice session, become aware of your internal discussion going on when performing. Once you have become aware of way in which you talk to yourself, you can begin to alter this by adding different types of self-talk at different times.

***Decide which talk you want to employ where***

Experiment with different types of self-talk is most effective for you in which context. This decision can be made after reflecting on self-talk during previous performances, as well as practicing different self-talk during training.

***Practice self-talk***

Practicing self-talk is essential. An athlete needs to be aware of the effects of the self-talk they are using on their performances before they use them, as well as which contexts are most applicable for using self-talk. This awareness comes from utilising the skill of self-talk during practice, and experimenting until the perfect combination is found.

**WHY:**

Self-talk helps with the following:

**Improve concentration:** Self talk can be utilised as a ‘trigger’ to activate an athlete’s focus to the present moment (e.g. “focus”; “breath”)

**Thought stopping:** Self talk can be utilised after poor performances/actions to stop a chain of negative thinking (“next shot”; “stop”; “focus on the now”)

**Preparation:** Alongside acting as a trigger to activate concentration, self-talk also forms an essential part of preparation routines and can be used to generate the correct state of arousal to play in (esp. The use of ‘words of affect’)

**Familiarity:** Given the close link between thoughts, actions and emotions, associations are formed between certain behaviours and emotions, and certain words (thoughts). Thus, automatic positive emotions and actions are activated by the regular use of certain words. Thus, just by using self-talk, an athlete can create familiarity of feeling and familiarity of actions.

**Change moods:** Given the close link between thoughts, actions and emotions, negative emotions not conducive to optimal performance can be changed by using positive self-talk.

**Change actions:** Given the close link between thoughts, actions and emotions, actions can be influenced by altering the way in which we think (speak) to ourselves. Remember, your thoughts create the context in which your actions need to take place.

**Improve motivation:** Self-talk, in particular ‘words of affect’ can improve your motivation for the action you are busy performing. Start using self-talk during practice sessions which you are dreading.

#### **PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

How do the following statements make you feel? Read one list at a time and evaluate how you feel after reading/hearing each list:

LIST A:	LIST B:
I am a champion	Maybe
I can do anything I set my mind to	If only
Let's Go!	I can't do any better
Come On!!!	This sucks
Nothing is beyond me	I'm afraid
I have prepared to be the best	I hate this
<b>EVALUATION:</b>	<b>EVALUATION:</b>

**Identify the following:** Make each specific to yourself

**Thought stopping** - Which word/self-statements will work best for you to stop negative self-talk? Why?

**Words of affect** - Identify several words which will be able to alter your mood

**Words of effect** - Identify several words specific and applicable to your game (remember, these words are as if you are a coach)

**Familiarity** - Identify words which will bring about positive emotion and action associations for you

**Trigger words** - Identify words/statements which will activate intense concentration

**Change positive to negative self-talk** - Recall some negative self-talk from past performances; write them down in the table below, and then change them to positive self-talk yet still concerning the chosen performance

Negative self-talk	Positive self-talk

### **3. BREATHING**

An athlete's ability to actively lessen or reduce the amount of physical and mental tension they are experiencing through controlled and mindful breathing techniques. Breathing techniques also aid the athlete to return to the here-and-now.

When gearing up for competition, very few athletes actually take the time to sit back and take a breath. The simple acts of inhaling, exhaling and relaxing for just a few moments can have a significant impact on sporting performance

#### **WHEN:**

Breathing is typically used as a mental skill by athlete's prior to, during, or after performing. Athletes who are very anxious prior to an event and thus have difficulty preparing effectively may use breathing to lessen this anxiety. Athletes may be struggling to concentrate during an event due to high levels of arousal or tension and thus may employ breathing during competition to deal with this. Finally, athletes may use breathing techniques after competition.

#### **WHERE:**

Typically, breathing techniques can be employed anywhere depending on the nature of the technique. Whereas listening to music may not be so possible to do during competition for

relaxation purposes, On-Point Breathing may be. Every breathing technique has its context in which it is most applicable.

**WHY:**

Breathing has an impact on our physical, emotional and cognitive state prior to performance and helps manage these aspects of our performance. Often tension, anxiety, stress and pressure are obstacles to effective preparation and concentration. Thus, breathing techniques can be very useful in helping athletes create the ideal state from which to perform.

**HOW:**

***On-Point Breathing***

On-Point Breathing is a breathing technique used in conjunction with other techniques as well as by itself. It involves breathing deeply in through your nose, keeping the breath for just a second longer than normal, and then exhaling through your mouth. Breathing should always be regulated and controlled. When you inhale and exhale, focus on keeping your chest as still as possible, allowing your stomach to swell up as it takes in air, and contract as you push air out. When we are under stress and anxious we tend to breath short, shallow breaths. Breathing is an essential part of all relaxation. Breathing can be done at any time; however, it is especially useful during performances as it is a simple technique which doesn't require lots of time (e.g. Walking up to your ball, a golfer can practice On-Point Breathing; Before hitting a shot, a golfer can practice On-Point Breathing). Just a few focussed and regulated breaths can have a huge calming effect.

***'Power 10' Breathing***

Clear your mind after a bad hole with a 'Power 10.' Inhale, slowly counting to four, then breathe out for six seconds. Repeat this nine times. This helps deliver oxygen to the brain to improve your focus. Counting uses the same part of the brain that we use to worry. It's difficult to do both at the same time.

Whenever you feel tense, recall two of the best moments of your life. Focus on the joy you felt as you inhale, and feel as if any negative thoughts are being forced out as you exhale.

***Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)***

PMR involves athletes tensing up different muscles, keeping them tense and contracted for 10 seconds, and then relaxing them again. The athlete typically starts (alternating between right and left) at the feet and toes -calves -quads -entire leg -abs -chest -back -arms and hands (clinched fists) -shoulders and neck -face -entire body. Before each muscle contraction the athlete spends a few moments mindfully noticing that muscle, the sensations running through it, and how it feels. PMR not only allows the athlete to become aware of the difference between a state of relaxation and tension (so that they can identify this in competition) but as they practice it, moving up along the body, they become progressively more and more relaxed. PMR needs to make use of On-Point Breathing and Mindfulness & Centering to improve its effectiveness. Regular practice of this technique will give an athlete improved control over the state of their muscles, and thus allow them to relax themselves effectively in high pressure situations. PMR can be done prior to, during, and after performances.

## **EVIDENCE:**

Just take a look at footballer Cristiano Ronaldo the next time he lines up a free-kick – there may be too much posturing and posing going on for some people's liking, but the moment he lines up his strike he inhales deeply before exhaling to allow himself the time to relax and focus on the task at hand.

The likes of rugby players, Jonny Wilkinson and Owen Farrell lining up conversion kicks do likewise and it is all part of their routine as they bid to 'tune out' the crowd, as well as any other distracting factors, and focus solely on the act of kicking the ball.

This ability to relax and focus on the skill to be executed is not something that can be implemented instantaneously but rather it is developed over time and with practice. There is a reason that the likes of Ronaldo, Wilkinson and Farrell are at the top of their game and it because they are willing to take time out of their lives to practice the art of controlled, and purposeful breathing.

## **4. TRIGGERS**

*"I drew a few deep breaths...Suddenly, despite the noise, energy, and excitement, there was solitude. My mind quieted." - Annika Sorenstam*

A trigger is a set physical action which activates an athlete's mental readiness. Triggers allow athletes to focus on physical cues and not be distracted by the numerous 'distractions'. It is as if triggers allow athletes to open the door to performance bliss, walk inside, and shut the door on anything unrelated.

A trigger includes the following aspects:

### ***Commitment***

Triggers prompt physical and therefore mental commitment. They allow an athlete to concentrate on the physical cues and not be distracted by the numerous 'distractions'.

### ***Decisiveness***

The knowledge that that your trigger has been preceded by the correct decisions and planning allows you to be decisive in your actions. Physical decisiveness requires mental certainty. A trigger allows you to acknowledge your preparation and therefore become certain that all is in place to play great.

### ***Mental Orientation***

Triggers activate an intense focus and orientation towards the target, as if nothing else exists for the next 30 seconds.

### ***Resting the Mind***

Given this prompt to intense focus, triggers also allow athletes to rest between shots/rounds/plays. This rest period will allow for mental freshness and the ability to call on intense focus when needed most. Concentrating for short bursts simplifies performance.

### ***Enter the Zone***

You have heard numerous experts talk about the zone. Triggers allow an athlete to enter a zone of concentration in which distractions are cut off and the athlete becomes 'selfish' in their orientation towards what they want to do, and how they want to do it. Such a zone is also characterized by calmness in an often-hectic performance context (due to spectators, expectations, opponents etc).

### **'Go' Signal**

Numerous athletes hesitate at the pinnacle of where they need to play a shot/create a play/execute a movement. Although at times they may continue through with this action, they are more often than not hesitant and uncommitted. Triggers become a mental 'go' signal and thus help athletes create the physical 'go' required to not over think an action, and simply go with it. This is required as athletes have often practiced these moves/shots/plays so well that their inability to play it well comes down to mental orientation, not physical inability.

### **EXAMPLES OF TRIGGERS:**

Looking at a dot on glove; the sound of the bell; running your hands through your hair; touching your ear; strapping your glove; pulling up your belt; a deep breath; a few key words to yourself; fixing a piece of jewellery;

### **WHEN:**

Triggers need to occur before a shot/play/action and need to signal/activate/prompt the above - mentioned at this stage. This is typically during a game/performance.

### **WHERE:**

Triggers typically occur on the field/in the ring, often a few moments before the actual performing of an action. There are no restrictions as to where and when a trigger can be used. The importance of a trigger lies in its ability to effectively prompt mental readiness.

### **WHY:**

High performance sport has numerous distractions and obstacles to effective performance, from spectators to expectations to thoughts. Triggers allow an athlete to commit to mental readiness, often an essential to effective performance.

### **HOW:**

#### ***Connect the physical and mental: make it noticeable***

It is essential that a trigger is significant enough to be noticed by the athlete. This is the only way in which a trigger will be useful. As such, a physical trigger (action) needs to be noticed mentally. This physical and mental connection is essential for a physical action to activate mental readiness.

#### ***Use your imagination***

Athletes can improve the effectiveness of triggers by metaphorically imagining the process of mental 'exclusion' and 'concentration'. This imagination comes into play as the first mental step after a physical action. Examples include:

*Switch:* Imagine a 'on' switch signifying concentration, focus, cutting off distraction.

*Entering a room:* Imagine entering a room of performance mastery, and closing the door on distractions, poor concentration and ineffective techniques.

*Inside bubble:* Imagine being caught inside a bubble of concentration which is impenetrable.

*Earphones:* Imagine earphones being put over your ears, cutting you off from the outside world and becoming entrenched in every detail of your play.

### ***Manage your arousal***

Using triggers should go hand in hand with managing your arousal levels. Many athletes use triggers to signal the beginning of changing arousal levels with breathing, imagery etc, whilst other athletes like to reach optimal arousal levels before triggering intense present moment focus. Either way, these two skills go hand in hand.

### ***Don't make triggers habits***

Triggers lose their effectiveness when they become unconscious actions that we do just "because". Triggers need to remain '**conscious**' and the athlete needs to be aware of what they are doing. Don't let your triggers become automatic. Thus, you might get to your "destination", but you have no idea how you got there.

### **PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

#### ***Define your own trigger***

Select a few possible triggers which you are comfortable with and which could potentially help you:

- During this week of practice, experiment with these different triggers
- Select one which works for you. Why have you selected this trigger?
- Modify it to be unique to your style and your needs
- Start practicing this trigger and make it part of your every shot
- Define every detail of this trigger on a piece of paper

Writing down the details of your trigger and defining it on a piece of paper is a good way of making sure that the athlete's perception of their trigger is more lasting and more detailed.

## **5. CONCENTRATION**

*"Our ability to focus on our shots depends on being able to enter or leave an intense state of concentration"* - Dr Karl Morris, Sport Psychologist

When an athlete is able to focus intently on task-relevant stimuli whilst being free from task-irrelevant stimuli: concentration means totally giving their attention to important things whilst ignoring distractions.

### **WHEN:**

It is a misconception that sport requires long sustained periods of intense concentration. Many sports in fact require short bursts of intense concentration-available to the athlete who is able to rest effectively in between these bursts. Utilising concentration in sport as an

effective performance enhancement tool involves the ‘switching’ on and off of this concentration.

Think of the golfer who on a given day hits an average of 72 shots. These 72 shots take approximately 40 seconds (including a pre-shot routine) of intense concentration to complete. Thus, a round of golf effectively takes 2880 seconds of intense concentration. That’s 48 minutes. Other sports (such as running a marathon) may require the ability to transcend the repetitiveness, as the action becomes more automatic, yet in a very technical part of the race, the ability to concentrate intensely is again required. Ultimately concentration should be on the present moment (‘the now’).

If the present moment presents us with a drinks break, concentrate appropriately. An athlete will benefit more from resting at such times, ensuring effective bursts of concentration when required, than from attempting a sustained period of average concentration.

#### **WHERE:**

As illustrated above, different sports have different concentration demands. Therefore the ‘where’ of concentration needs to match the demands of the task the athlete is occupied. Take the following example: a rugby player may require a degree of concentration prior to a game in the change room when his coach is discussing the game-plan, in particular when it comes to his direct role in the strategy. However, whilst standing on the field waiting for an injured player to be attended to, the player may not require the same degree of concentration than when he is kicking for posts in front of a hostile crowd that makes him feel anxious. This example indicates to us that there are different types of concentration and different types of stimuli.

#### **HOW:**

Employing effective concentration involves knowing the different facets which could influence our optimal concentration:

##### ***Types of Concentration***

**Fine:** Fine concentration indicates concentrating on one/two things well (e.g. a golfer concentrating only on striking the golf ball).

**Extensive:** Extensive concentration indicates concentrating on various things at the same time (e.g. a soccer player concentrating on the ball, his opponent, the referee, his coach’s instruction, and his teammates).

##### ***Types of Stimuli***

**Task-relevant:** Stimuli which is relevant to the athlete performing optimally (e.g. the ball, the opponent, technique).

**Task-irrelevant:** Stimuli which is not relevant to the athlete performing optimally (e.g. thoughts, emotions, spectators). Such stimuli are seen as distractions.

The above discussion indicates that different athletes and sports concentrate in different ways on different things. A big commonality is that concentration can be switched between fine and extensive, relevant and irrelevant. Look at the following example:

### ***Externalising distractions***

I was once told the following story about former South African opening batsman Gary Kirsten. I'm not sure how accurate it is but it illustrates a great principle of concentration. Being an opening batsman, Gary often faced the best and most accurate bowlers in the world, bowling at speeds of 150km/hour. This was a cause for serious concern as a ball at that speed could not only have destroyed Gary's body if he were hit, but also destroy his career if you didn't learn to cope with the accuracy and speed. Facing bowling of that calibre and speed required some serious concentration (fine task relevant concentration).

Naturally Gary had a degree of fear (task irrelevant stimuli) for the consequences (both physical and career-wise) that such bowling could have on him. This fear was distracting and getting in the way of Gary being 100% focussed on the task at hand. Gary consulted an expert who introduced him to a common psychological technique known as 'externalization', in which experiences such as fear (emotions) are seen as external to the individual and not defining them or their actions. Gary learned to use this technique to externalise fear.

Although he always felt that fear, he was able to distinguish between times in which the fear was with him, and times when he needed to separate himself from the fear in order to concentrate on his batting. Go and have a look at some of Gary Kirsten's test innings...the story goes that Gary would after every ball walk towards 'square-leg' (a field position directly behind the batsman as he faces up to the bowler) where he would meet up with his fear. Whilst standing there between balls, he could concentrate on fear whilst having a look at the crowd and thinking about what he had done the previous ball (all task irrelevant stimuli). However, when Gary walked in towards the crease to take up his batting position for the next ball, he would leave fear at 'square-leg', allowing him to focus solely on the ball travelling towards him (fine task relevant concentration).

In such a way, by 'externalising the distraction of fear', Gary Kirsten was able to master his concentration and go on to become one of South Africa's most successful and consistent opening batsman.

***Mindfulness*** is a technique which helps athletes become focussed on the present-moment, and thus free themselves from distractions. Practicing effective mindfulness has been shown to improve concentration.

***Triggers*** (see: Triggers chapter) are experiences/objects which can activate/prompt optimal concentration at the right time. Practicing an effective pre-shot routine can be a golfer's trigger to activate intense concentration.

### **WHY:**

Concentration remains one of the most vital facets of any sport. Understanding concentration and knowing what type of concentration is specific to you, allows you to

practice such concentration in practice and at home, in order for you to improve your own concentration.

### **PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

#### ***Word Count***

Count the number of words of the ‘Externalizing Fear’ story we read earlier. You have 1min (whilst the athlete counts the words, distract him in subtle ways by speaking to him, humming, singing, asking questions (there are 383 words in the passage).

#### ***Clock Check Marks***

Place a non-digital clock on a desk. Sit down and relax. The objective is to remain focused on the “seconds” hand. Your job is to make a check mark on a piece of paper every time three seconds pass. Someone else determines the time duration of the exercise without telling you. If you miss a recording you are not allowed to make a correction. As you improve your ability to focus, the time interval (between check marks) and the entire length of the exercise can be increased. Since the duration of the exercise is determined by someone else, the number of check marks is compared to the correct number.

#### ***Grid Number Exercise***

Draw a grid on a piece of paper with ten rows and ten columns. Place a number between zero and 100 randomly in each square until all numbers have been used. The purpose is to scratch off each number in sequence as fast as you can, starting at zero. This is a fun and commonly used exercise referred to as a “grid number exercise.” There are many variations that you can create and make more difficult as your ability to focus improves. You can also compete against a family member or friend, but must remain silent.

#### ***Silent repetition***

Choose an inspiring word or phrase, or just a simple sound, and repeat it silently in your mind for five minutes. When your mind can concentrate more easily, try to reach ten minutes of uninterrupted concentration.

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