An Application of the PETTLEP Style of Imaging

Alison Eberts

Michigan State University

Proficiency Level

Abstract

The following study was designed to explore the concept of imaging for athletic performance. Research backed comments are outlined considering the uses/purposes and the value of imagery. Imaging refers to creating a mental representation for an athlete to focus on to improve performance in competition setting. Imaging has many uses to help athletes, including focus in competition settings, control over anxiety, practicing refining specific skills, etc. The study involves writing a script for a high school lacrosse player after an interview regarding his goals or areas for improvement in the sport. After delivering the script, the athlete provided feedback regarding the quality of the imaging session. The athlete commented on what worked very well, as well as pointing out weaknesses in the script. This information was valuable for creating future scripts for imaging sessions with athletes. Based on this study, it can be noted how to successfully compose, deliver, and refine a script for an effective imaging session.

Introduction

When it comes to athletics, the competition is just as much of a mental game as it is a physical one. Having control of mental skills allows athletes to be totally invested in competition, which increases chances of victory or success. Being "in the game" mentally helps the athlete to tune out the rest of the surroundings and avoid any distractions; they can be totally in tune with the task at hand. Though it may seem easy enough to just "focus," turning a blind eye to the entire plethora of distractions is much easier said than done. Thus, it takes practice to train the mind to focus. A strategy to help athletes check in mentally is to practice imagining, or, to recall events so vividly that things are recreated in the mind. If athletes can imagine themselves in the moment doing something correctly, it is likely they will be able to take that mental practice to apply to physical practice. Imaging can help athletes act in the moment by allowing them recall their imagined situations.

By definition, imagery means " 'a polisensory experience' [that] combines as many senses as possible along with emotions and feelings in order to generate a vivid mental image" (Riberio et al, 2015, p. 1). The point of imaging is for athletes to imagine themselves in performance; particularly, one goal is focused on to help strengthen an area athletes want to improve. An imaging session involves the athlete recalling every detail possible about something related to their sport. That way, the athletes can close their eyes and simply imagine themselves in action. Athletes can use imagery for a variety of measures, such as "to prepare themselves to get what they wanted out of training, perfect skills within training sessions…to imagine themselves being successful in competition, and to see themselves achieving their ultimate goal" (Orlick & Partington, 1988, p. 112). The task itself

seems pretty simple – think about yourself participating in your athletic. However, using imaging successfully takes time and practice for it to start impacting athletes' performance in real time. Thus, there needs to be time for imaging as part of regular routine. According to Williams et al (2013), coaches who "systematically incorporated [imagery] into athletes' training regimes and competition preparation" (p. 110) helped their athletes master the skill because they knew how to use the tool for its benefit.

Current research suggests that imagining can have profound impact on helping athletes control mental complications that can hinder performance. According to Williams and Cumming (2016), imagery can be particularly helpful for controlling anxiety. This research is complimented by the findings of Grushko et al that, "imagery plays…a motivational role in influencing behavior" (2016, p.182). No matter how much talent athletes possess, anxiety can take over when it's time to perform, and they can choke under pressure. Using imaging effectively helps athletes calm their nerves because they can imagine themselves performing correctly. Williams and Cumming state that, "guided imagery can effectively increase self-confidence…[because] imagining oneself performing skills and strategies well, or achieving goals will increase belief in one's own capabilities by giving the athlete a sense that he or she has been successful (2016, p. 269). Mental blocks such as depression and anxiety are very trainable if athletes know how to take those thoughts from debilitating to facilitating, or, able to be used as a confidence booster. Anxiety is often a result of feeling out of control. Instead, if athletes can train their thoughts by seeing themselves successful, they are taking

more control over their mental activity; thus, if athletes can learn to control their thoughts within their regular practices, it will be much easier to do so in competition settings.

Just like it is something that is worked on and practiced over time, imagining is more than just seeing ourselves in our mind, or watching ourselves. Imagining involves incorporating physical and environmental factors to help athletes set up an experience that is as realistic as possible. Wakefield and Smith (2012) argue that the physical aspect of imagining is the most important aspect of all, and that the imagining experience should be made as physical as possible. This includes things like having athletes recall physical sensations, such as sweat, or pain, or energy, or gasping for air. This experience ranges from athlete to athlete based on factors like weight, stamina, etc. As such, Wakefield and Smith urge the necessity of making imagery experiences unique and tailored to individual athlete performance. Environmental factors include things relating to where the action takes place. The best imagery sessions will happen when the environment of practice is as close to how it is in real time situations as possible. This includes things like dressing and using equipment (gloves, sticks, helmets) and taking the athlete to the location where the mental scene happens. However, this may not always be possible; when the total environment cannot be recreated, it is suggested that coaches use videos or photos of past performances to "help [athletes] identify key details of the scene…and provide a template for imagining the initial scene" (Cumming et al, 2016, p. 9).

Physical and environmental aspects of imaging are the first two factors known as the PETTLEP model of imagery. PETTLEP stands for physical, environment, task, timing, learning, emotion, and perspective, and synthesizes how all of these factors come together to create effective imaging exercises. According to Wakefield and Smith (2012), this model was "originally designed to be used as a minimum checklist when designing imagery interventions" (p.2). Combined, these factors all make up part of competition setting, so trying to use them in imaging exercises will give the athlete the most robust image session possible. As physical and environment were described above, "task" refers to the imagined activity, and its appropriateness to age, talent/skill level, athlete goals, etc. Timing is the pace in which the activity is completed, and should be completed similarly to how it is completed in performance settings. Learning relates to the skill or ability level of the athlete; this suggests that as the athlete becomes more skilled, the image should be adjusted to help the athlete take on more complicated tasks. Emotion recognizes the idea that there are a lot of emotions tied to participation in sports. When creating imagery for athletes, the emotions should be recreated as much as possible to help an athlete focus on how to use or work through those emotions. Perspective is the notion of how the athlete sees him/herself in the image. This perspective could be either internal (the athlete is seeing things happen as they would in real time – what they see as they perform), or external (imaging as though the athlete is watching him/herself on video) (Wakefield and Smith, 2015).

The following study involved creating an image for a junior lacrosse player, and a script was written after a mini interview about what the athlete normally

experiences in a game, and what he would like to improve upon specifically. Taka, the subject, was given a scenario with the goal to imagine things as perfectly as he could, and to comment on how effective the method was used. The purpose of this study was to gauge on the effectiveness of the PETTLEP model when applied to specific skill refinement.

Methods

Participant

As stated above, Taka is a junior in high school and has been playing lacrosse since fourth grade. Taka has gone back and forth regarding his involvement on the high school team due to his relationship with the coach. Taka clearly enjoys lacrosse, and was even overheard trying to recruit freshmen to come out for the team in the fall. He was chosen because of his reputation as a great student and model peer, my own personal relationship with him (that includes knowing some of the emotional struggles he has included in his life), and, for myself, to learn more about his connection to lacrosse.

Pre-lesson Interview

Before writing up the script, Taka was interviewed for a sense of his current attitudes toward lacrosse, and to help me create the best script possible. Taka was asked questions along the GROW model of questioning; this style of questioning asks athletes to think in terms of their goals, realities, outcomes, and "next steps" (that is, what *will* you do next?). As outlined by Gould (2017), asking questions along this model allows students opportunities to think about their responses and to be cognitively engaged in the situation. For this particular interview, questions fell into the

"goal" and "reality" categories. For example, Taka was asked questions about his goals for the season, his perfect conditions for a game of lacrosse, what he has accomplished in the past that can be useful to what he would like to get out of this session, and what specific things may be happening right now in his world of lacrosse. From there, a script was written to guide Taka's imaging. The goal Taka specified was to improve his ability to cradle the ball, or, to hold it in place before quickly passing it through the net or to a teammate.

Script

According to Williams et al (2013), using a script for an imaging session can provide parameters to help an athlete guide their thinking toward a specific athletic practice. When preparing the script, there are certain aspects to be taken into consideration, such as whether or not direct competition is a factor, the talent level of the individual, the age/experience of the individual, the individual's personality or thoughts regarding imagery, and prior experience with imagery. In Taka's case, he specified that he has been given imaging situations before, and commented that they aren't necessarily helpful. Taka is a very down to earth, calm personality. He describes himself as consistent, and typically doesn't experience much waver in his emotions when he performs. The script was written with this in mind, and became more so a design to help Taka see himself in game mode.

Results

Lesson delivery

Taka's script (see appendix A) was designed to help him picture himself in a game carrying the ball (cradling) against tough competition. Particularly, Taka specified that, of all teams, he wanted to beat Brother Rice of Bloomfield Hills the most. Due to weather conditions, the session had to take place indoors. However, Taka used his gloves and lacrosse stick during the activity to engage some of the kinesthetic energy, and was given a blown up picture of Riverbank Stadium to look at to help him recall the images of game situations. The script was read to Taka with his eyes closed to better focus himself. Additionally, Taka closed his eyes for this activity, and took some time to focus on breathing and getting himself set up in the zone. The delivery of the script took roughly 2.5 – 3 minutes. Pauses were taken at various spots for information absorption.

Feedback

After delivering the script, Taka was given a series of questions to discuss how the session went. When asked which part of the session he enjoyed most, Taka said that he enjoyed the description of Riverbank Stadium and the conditions the most. This was helpful to him because, in his words, it gave him a sense of the "home turf" feeling. The least useful point of the session for Taka was describing the huddle situation, particularly because he didn't think the coach is particularly strong at creating team motivation or determination. This, he described, just felt unnecessary for the activity. When asked how this activity could have been done better, Taka specified that it would be helpful to include more relations to smell in preparation for competition. Specifically, Taka pointed

out how the smell of the turf helps him to think of lacrosse, and the smell of sweat, which, as he described, indicates hard work and effort in game situations.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of imaging for completion preparation. Specifically, Taka stated that he wanted to improve his ability to carry the ball through oncoming defenders; additionally, Taka wanted to improve cradling the ball in his stick to pass to teammates or to score without defenders taking advantage or possession. The script was tailored to his needs based on the pre-activity interview. By asking Taka specific questions along the GROW model, I could create a script that focused on his goals for lacrosse, and that created a vivid image for him. As far as considering the individual athlete, the script and imagery were successful. Like Williams et al stress, I did my best to "[Consider this] information…[to] make the script…accurate and realistic…[to] ensure the athlete is imaging skills and scenarios that are appropriate and relevant to him" (2013, p.11). For Taka, this involved my including aspects such as his goal to make all state, the competition against Brother Rice, the perfect weather conditions, etc. As Taka said, this portion of the imaging was done well, and that the descriptions of the stadium in relation to his goals gave him a sense of belonging.

It can be said that this imaging was most tuned to visual aspects. Limitations to the success of this session include things such as weather and lack of all senses relevant to the athlete. Due to the inclement weather, it was not appropriate for us to head to Riverbank Stadium to perform this session. However, Taka's kinesthetic energy was activated as he wore his gloves and used his stick to go through some of the motions for this image. Additionally, not enough senses were included to make the image completely

useful for Taka. According to Wakefield and Smith, "Introducing all seven [PETTLEP] components at one time may be impractical and create overload for the athlete. Therefore, we suggest that practitioners focus on those elements pertinent to the athlete, and incorporate as many of these as possible" (2012, p. 3). Even though I did not make use of certain senses, such as smell and touch, Taka specified that for him, smell especially plays an important role in recreating experiences in lacrosse.

Implications

Teaching imagery is a great way to counteract anxiety that many athletes can feel, and to boost self-confidence during performance. With this in mind, imaging is a great resource to help athletes calm their nerves and to control their thoughts and emotions. Additionally, imaging helps athletes tune out possible distractors that would hinder competition performance. For these reasons, coaches should make imaging a part of regular practice routines. However, this experience has shown me that more care needs to be put into writing the actual script. While conducting the pre-interview was a very helpful strategy, it can be realized that more questions should be applied to helping an athlete get what they want out of a session. Specifically, athletes should be asked to consider what they notice most when they are in their zone (environment, senses, etc.). Additionally, scripts should be narrowed to what the athlete needs specifically, which also requires investigating what the athlete doesn't need. In Taka's case, time should have been devoted to incorporating skills, and the bit with the team huddle should have been removed. When taking athlete considerations into mind, imaging can have profound effects on performance.

References

Cumning, J. et al (2016). Developing imagery ability effectively: A guide to layered stimulus response training. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action,* doi: 10.1080/21520704.2016.1205698

Gould, D. (2017). *GROW model explanation.* Video lecture, retrieved from https://d2l.msu.edu/d2l/le/content/592678/viewContent/5392587/View

Grushko, A.I. et al (2016). Does the motivation, anxiety, and imagery contribute to football (soccer) experience? *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences, 233 (2016),* 181-185.

Orlick, T. & Partington, J. (1988). Mental links to excellence. *The Sport Psychologist, 2,* pp. 105-130

Riberio, J. et al (2015). The use of imagery by Portuguese soccer goal keepers. *Journal of Imagery Research in Sport and Physical Activity,* pp. 1-9, doi: 10.1515/jirspa 20140009

Wakefield, C. & Smith, D. (2012). Perfecting practice: Applying the PETTLEP model of motor imagery. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, 3 (1),* pp. 1-11.

Williams, S.E. & Cumming, J. (2016). Athlete imagery ability: A predictor of confidence and anxiety intensity and direction. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 14 (3),* pp. 268-280.

Williams, S. E. et al (2013). Seeing the difference: Developing effective imagery scripts for athletes. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, 4,* pp. 109-121.

Appendix A

Script Used for Taka's Imaging Session

It's game day against Brother Rice, and you're ready to help Huron make a statement. You know this is your game; it's mid 60's, the sky is a mix of sun and clouds, and there's just enough breeze in the air to keep things cool and comfortable. As you're warming up, notice the orange and white zipping in and out of your range of vision, but that's all they are – snips of color that are there in flashed. You don't pay them any attention.

You're in Riverbank Stadium, and you hear the sounds of the stadium filling up. The steps on bleachers echo, and cars pass by on the way to Huron Parkway. The turf is springy under your feet.

Whistles tweet, the National Anthem sounds out the loudspeakers, and you're called into a huddle. As the coach outlines his expectations for you, you outline those you have for yourself. In your mind, you focus on two words: all state. You know what you need to do, and you remind yourself again and again; play more selfishly, create and maintain intensity, and allow yourself to take more shorts. These reminders are imprinted as you step on to the field.

Now those flashes of orange and white come into shape as you approach your opponents. You take a moment to let the soak in – to study their outlines and shapes. Then, you are in locked in. You know when you are in the zone, and you don't waver in your emotions or your thoughts. You feel your heart pick up-tempo, and you're excited to use that intensity to help carry the team.

Your hands feel warm inside your gloves, and your fingers assume the familiar position around your stick. Your helmet has encased your vision so you only see what you need to in front of you. And at the moment, you only need to see the grey sphere that zips around from stick to stick. As it lands in your own net, a switch is turned and your feet act on your own. Your feet snap into action, as your movements are quick, quick, quick.

As three orange and white defenders approach you, the only thing you can think of is, "cradle." You know that you need to hold the ball like it is an egg, while moving it quickly and swiftly as though it is indestructible. As the defenders close in on you, you look past them toward an open Huron stick. With a quick and seamless snap of the wrist, it flies from the cradle of your stick to the cradle of your teammates, and your defenders are left to try to readjust on the fly.