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# SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS: PRACTICE DRILLS TO IMPROVE CONCENTRATION

## INTRODUCTION

Many athletes have difficulty learning mental game skills or strategies because the mental game is abstract—compared to practicing physical skills. If you want to improve your tennis serve, for example, you go to the court and practice drills an instructor has taught you to improve your serving motion.

When learning mental game strategies, the first step is to understand the concepts such as how to concentrate, what you need to focus on, and how to refocus when distracted. However, the conceptual learning is only one part of the learning process. You must be able to apply the skills in a meaningful way to your sports performance consistently. Even then, you have no guarantee that you will improve your concentration in competition or practice.

Several factors can intervene between the conceptual phase of learning and the application of the concepts to your performance. You may understand the concepts

well, but can't apply them in competition. For example, the pressure of crunch time may cause you to tighten up and not focus on the proper performance cues. Or you may become physically tired at the end of a long hockey game and not have the energy to concentrate your best.

What other mental game factors can interfere with your ability to apply focusing strategies to competition even when you fully understand the concepts?

- Anxiety and fear of failure
- Perfectionism or trying to perform perfectly
- Lack of intensity or motivation
- Loss of focus after making a mistake
- Obsessed with results or outcomes
- Social approval or worry about what other think
- Inability to concentration for long periods
- Difficulty to get refocused after a break in play
- Inability to concentration with outside or external distractions (fans at the game)
- Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or another disorder that affects concentration
- A problem or crisis in your life

## DO CONCENTRATION DRILLS WORK?

Coaches and athletes often ask about the use of “drills” to improve concentration. My philosophy about improving your focus in sports is not only based on teaching you concentration drills per se. I believe that you or your athletes know how to concentrate and can concentrate well at certain times.

However, your powers of concentration are often taxed when you are asked to perform in adverse conditions when many distractions are competing for your attention. As I discussed above, several factors interfere with your ability to fully concentrate. So ultimately your focus of attention can become misplaced on the wrong cues or become taxed by many factors beyond your control.

The ability to concentrate, which I cover in **The Focused Athlete Program**, includes several important elements:

1. The ability to identify relevant performance cues and task-irrelevant information in your sport.
2. The ability to become fully immersed in the important performance cues for successful execution.
3. The ability to use refocusing skills when you recognize that you are distracted.

4. The ability to shift focus from broad to narrow and narrow to broad.
5. The ability to focus after long periods of downtime.
6. Staying focused during long performances.

Although I think you should first learn the above focusing strategies, I do believe there is value in learning and practicing concentration skills to help you improve the above abilities. If you want to improve concentration, the best option is to learn the above six focusing abilities (covered in **The Focused Athlete**).

However, many athletes often ask about concentration “drills” they can learn to improve focus.

Do you think Tiger Woods or Michael Jordan used “drills” to develop their concentration or did they discipline themselves to focus on what was important during practice and competition? I would think both are essential for improving focus. Still, if you want to improve your focus in practice with concentration exercises, you should try to master the following simple exercises.

## TIGHTEN YOUR FOCUS DRILL

Select a small object like an apple, golf ball or tennis ball. Place the golf ball on a desk in front of you. The goal is to see how long you can visually study the object without becoming distracted or have your mind wander from the ball. If a thought unrelated to the ball pops into your head, try to let it pass and focus back on the ball.

This simple drill tests the intensity of focus and gives you an awareness of how irrelevant thoughts can come into your mind. You may find that you can only do this for a few seconds before you are interrupted by other thoughts unrelated to the object of attention. This requires that you become aware of the unrelated thoughts when they occur and refocus on the ball. Good concentration is about paying attention to what's important.

## PURPOSEFUL DISTRACTION DRILL

You will need a partner to do this drill or another source of distraction, such as an audio recording. The goal is to perform a skill in your sport you do every day. For example, if you play golf, another person tries to distract you on purpose while you try to make a putt.

A friend, instructor, or parent will need to do his best to distract you by saying things such as, “don’t miss the putt” or “if you miss, you’ll lose the match.” Your goal is to pay attention to performing the task, while ignoring the external distraction. This is one of the methods Earl Woods, Tiger’s father, used to train Tiger to concentration with distractions.

## MENTAL REHEARSAL OR IMAGERY DRILL

If you tried visualization or mental rehearsal in the past, you have already practiced concentrating intensely. Visualizing a successful play in hockey can only be done with intense concentration. Mental rehearsal might be the most applicable concentration exercise in a practice setting. Begin by picking a task in your sport that you can’t practice often or are limited in your practice. Skydivers, for example, need to rely heavily on their mental imagery skills to learn maneuvers during ground training due the expense of practicing in the air.

The goal with this drill is to visualize your performance from a first person perspective (like you are actually performing the skill rather than watching yourself such as when you watch a video). This is when you want to keep focused while visualizing your sport. You can take it a step further and practice your refocusing skills within your imagery after you complete **The Focused Athlete**.



## CONCENTRATION GRID

The concentration grid is a drill to help you improve your ability to visually scan in a given time. The grid comprises of a 10-by-10 blocks containing two digit numbers ranging from 00 to 40. The goal of this drill is to put a slash through as many double digit numbers as possible in a given time.

You must start with the 00 double digit and work through the numbers in sequence. For example, 00, 01, 02, 03.... You should give yourself 1 minute time trials. When the time is up count the amount of numbers you have managed to score through.

You might want to do this drill with a partner and compare your scores. When starting a new time trail start with the number directly after the last number used in your previous trial. Those who can't disregard everything but the task at hand do poorly. If you have the ability to concentrate, scan and store the relevant cues you will normally have a score in the high 20's or 30's.

**See Appendix A for a modified concentration grid exercise you can perform.**

## TRIGGER OR CUE WORD DRILL

This drill helps you use trigger words to stay focused in your sport. The goal of this exercise is to help you stay focused in the moment. First, select 3 tasks in your sport. After you have done this, select a cue word or short phrase that helps your “trigger” the correct action in each.

For example, in a tennis serve you might select ‘timing’, for a backhand return ‘follow through’, and for return of serve ‘anticipate’ to help you be ready. Try using each of these trigger words or phrases before the execution of a task. When you have mastered your trigger word or phrase for each task move on and select a new statement to help you focus on a different aspect of the same task. You might also want to change the task and develop new cue word statements.

## TURNING FAILURE INTO SUCCESS DRILL

This is an ideal drill for staying focused on the task when adversity strikes. I want you to use this drill after making a mistake or error in your sport. There is a three step process to this refocusing drill. First, when you commit an error think of a short phrase to define the error you made in execution.

For example, after hitting an unsuccessful sand shot in golf you might say “I need to stay more balanced.” Secondly, visualize executing the successful outcome you desired. Thirdly, now move your mind to the next shot and visualize the successful outcome that you will obtain on the next shot. This drill helps you let go of errors and not become distracted or lose your focus. It will reinforce the successful actions needed for execution and keep you on task for your next play.

## **PRACTICE WITH COMPETITIVE DISTRACTIONS**

In 1984 Olympics, Peter Vidmar won a gold medal in gymnastics on the pommel horse and a silver medal in the all around. He was an advocate of a strategy called specificity practice or training. This means that you should practice in the conditions you will perform or as close as possible – with all the distractions you must cope with in competition.

In the UCLA gym during practice, Vidmar and his teammates would do dress rehearsals. They played crowd noise, gathered people around to watch, used mock judges, and then performed their routines just like they were in competing. In this fashion, they were preparing to focus with the ordinary distractions they will face in competition. This strategy should be a normal part of your practice routines. Collegiate gymnastic

coaches call this concept doing “pressure sets” to get acclimated to the distractions in a real meet.

As an example, in gymnastic you may play a tape recorder at maximum volume of a crowd cheering and try and perform your routines. You can wear the normal competitive outfit you will need to perform with. You can ask other team members to watch you perform your routine.

You could have persons sitting at a judging table and judge your routines. You want to set up the practice environment to match the circumstances of competition – as close as you can.

If you can't do this in your sport easily, the next best option is imagine being in competition and performing with all the typical distractions and hoopla you will face. For example, you might use the mental rehearsal drill and image that the bases are loaded with the game on the line and you are up to bat.

## CONCLUSION

Now that you have learned these concentration drills, your goal is to practice these drills everyday. To get the most improvement from the drills, I recommend that you practice one or two of the drills 10-15 minutes a day. If you are having trouble doing the drills outlined here, do not give up – continue to practice the drill until you have mastered it.

Furthermore, you might want to customize the concentration drills to suit your sport. There are many variations for each drill and I would encourage you to experiment with these. Also, you should re-read this e-book after you have completed **The Focused Athlete** CD and Workbook program.

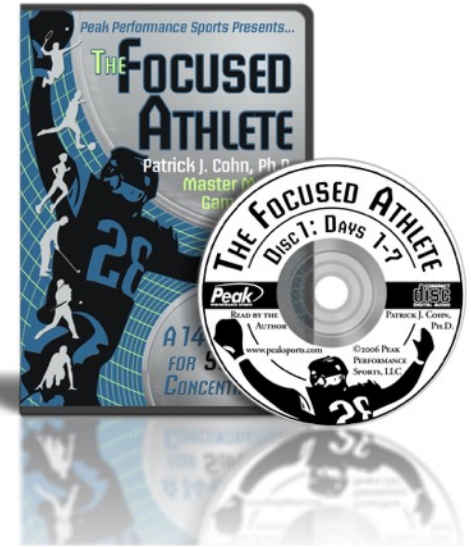
**Appendix A is on the following page.**

**Appendix A.** *Modified Concentration Grid Directions: Beginning with the number 01, put a slash (/) through each number in the proper sequence until you reach the number 40. Time how long it takes you to complete the exercise with and without distraction or while doing another activity simultaneously.*

39	18	29	23	07
24	01	14	34	19
09	26	06	40	10
13	25	33	38	31
32	21	27	22	04
02	37	11	15	12
30	08	03	36	28
16	20	17	35	05

## THE FOCUSED ATHLETE CD PROGRAM

If you're an athlete who is frequently distracted, loses focus in competition, or wants to learn more about how to focus better under pressure, check out our [Focused Athlete CD and Workbook Program](#). It's a complete system to teach you how to focus like a champion and harness the power of a zone focus every time you step on the playing field, court, track, or course in practice and games!



## MENTAL GAME COACHING PROGRAMS

You can improve your focus with one-on-one mental game coaching with Dr. Cohn himself in Orlando Florida or [get coaching from anywhere in the world](#) via telephone, Skype, FaceTime or video conferencing with Dr. Cohn himself. All programs include the Athlete's Mental Aptitude Assessment (AMAP), weekly coaching sessions, unlimited email correspondence, and Athlete's Mental Edge workbooks and other performance-boosting eBooks.

[One-on-one mental coaching](#) is the **fastest and most effective method** to improve your mental game, boost your performance, and make lasting changes. Contact Dr. Cohn today for more information about mental game coaching for your sport.

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