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Finding the Sweetspot

How to build your very own "mental performance routine"

Player/Coach Manual

This manual's primary and sole use is for players and coaches alike to read, and learn/understand the importance of having a mental performance routine, and exactly how they can build their own!

DISCLAIMER:

This manual is NOT for mental health purposes or mental health treatment, its contents are strictly educational and performance training-based purposes. Boomstick Mental Performance is not responsible for this manual's misuse or performance results on account of.

Every coach's favorite saying is "90 percent of the game is half mental," but very few actually articulate what that even means, or how to have "good" mental. As a player, coach, or parent of a young athlete– this manual does exactly that, it is a structured set of exercises/instruction in which YOU will choose what to add to, and create your very own "mental performance routine" that will hopefully enhance your in-game, on-the-field performance for whatever your desired sport may be!

This manual, in its entirety, is an outlined empirically-based, research-based, and literature-based educational instruction format that will guide you through the 'why?' the 'how?' and the 'when?' when it comes to mental performance enhancement. Much evidence supports the validity of this manual.

In this manual, you will find a list of exercises included with listed instructions, you will find the ones that best fit YOUR game, and you will be instructed on 'how' to apply them in your routine.

Remember, you SHOULD NOT do them all, try some that you like best, experiment with and find what works for you, and fits best into your training regime. It's YOUR game, and YOUR career, and you have the power to enhance your mental performance today!

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Complete List of Mental Skills Exercises (for easy reference)

Why should you have a mental performance routine?

The answer to that question is simple in principle, the mental game of any sport, whether it be baseball, golf, football, basketball, track, or any other arena of athletics is absolutely imperative for optimal performance. You've heard all of your coaches, time and time again, yell "Your head's not in the game!" Few, if any coaches ever really instruct, show, or teach their players what that even means. What even is "having your head in the game" anyway?

From the grounds of what many researchers and literature has to say, "having your head in the game" is having all of your concentration and undivided attention fully immersed in the present moment, and the present activity, which is whatever you are doing, or are trying to accomplish while in competition.

Every athlete has had an off-game, where they just could not seem to figure it out. As hard as they try, their concentration and focus is not in the game, and quite frankly, it is nowhere to be found. On the contrary, every athlete has had games where they are “in the zone” where nothing can stop them from performing at their best. At that moment, they are true world-beaters. Essentially, that is the true pinnacle of this manual and program, to instruct YOU how to have that mindset and feeling ALL THE TIME, or more often at the very least. Sounds too good to be true? Guess what, your favorite athletes in the world– Michael Jordan, Tom Brady, Tiger Woods, Barry Bonds, Derek Jeter, and many more of the top of the top absolutely prioritize mental training and have accredited it as the ‘missing link’ to their sustained success in their arena.

‘Missing’ is the key word for you, as the athlete, a person could win a lot of money betting that over 95% of amateur athletes do not have or use a mental performance routine at all. This is where YOU will gain the edge over your competition, by using this training manual, and building your very own mental performance regime to be just like the greats– just like Tom Brady or Michael Jordan. Not all of us were born with God-given ability such as the likes of many high-level athletes, Tom Brady and Michael Jordan certainly were not either. Therefore, to level the playing field, and to build yourself and your mindset into the type of player that can face any competition with your best presence and best ability, you must have a mental performance routine.

Therefore, in short, to answer the original question "Why should you have a mental performance routine?" Research and empirical literature shows that having some kind of mental training has the ability to boost your:

- In-game focus/concentration
- Ability to have flow
- Ability to reduce distractions
- Ability to stay mindful, and have a present-moment oriented mindset
- Mental flexibility
- Visualization/imagery of success skills
- Proper breathing for oxygenation and relaxation

These skills, which are anchored within this manual, can help you to be able to perform in your optimal state of being as often as possible and boost your overall performance results.

Basic Structure of the Mental Performance Routine

There is one slight caveat to this manual's purpose, that is that this is not a 'quick fix' or "magic guru trick" that will turn you into a monster over-night. Mental performance enhancement is a skill that HAS to be developed, very similar to your weight training or technique training for your respective sport.

If you are to, in fact, have a mental performance routine, you must train on it almost daily for it to have any effect in regards to your performance output. The good news is that you do not need a weight room, practice field, or gym facility of any kind to carry out your routine.

The basic structure of your mental performance routine should look like such:

• 10-40 minutes in duration per day, at least 4x per week	(Don't be scared, it can be somewhere in between 10 and 40 minutes). 40 minutes is for the 'advanced' athlete, the Tiger Woods-types of the world. If you are serious, this duration can be your end goal.
• Optimal results require one of each factor: ○ Proper breathing ○ Re-emphasis of Mental Approach ○ Mindfulness practice ○ Visualization/Imagery	Mental performance is not a black-and-white endeavor, it is a blend of skills and abilities that, with practice, will show up when you need your performance the most, in competition.
• Learn proper breathing techniques	Adequate oxygenation and stress reduction.
• Establish a healthy Mental Approach.	This will be your focus and fallback in and during competition.
• Develop a present-moment-oriented mindset.	This is the wave that sails the ship. Maintaining a present-moment mindset keeps you in the moment, allowing you to enter an optimal flow state to perform your best and limit distractions.
• Practice Visualization/Imagery	This is the most fun exercise, visualization/imagery systematically trains your neural pathways to predict, expect, react, and perform the way you wish based on the stimuli that you are faced with in the heat of competition, and it's like you are lucid-dreaming of

	how you want to perform in-game.

REMEMBER: A mental performance routine should be unique to YOU, experiment with, and try the exercises throughout this manual that will best fit YOUR game.

TIP: Having a PROPER BREATHING, a MENTAL APPROACH, a PRESENT MOMENT state of BEING, and using VISUALIZATION/IMAGERY combined TOGETHER is recommended for maximal performance results.

An example mental performance routine might look like this:

- 3 minutes of present moment box breathing counting (1-6 breaths)
- 3 minutes of present moment breathing practice of rehearsing your mental approach while keeping your breathing slow and long.
- 3-5 minutes of a present moment cue word focus meditation (with correct breathing).
- 5-10 minutes of visualization/imagery in which you blend your mental approach, present-moment mindful state, breathing, and imagery of you performing your sport (first person perspective)-- focusing on a specific aspect of your in-game performance, with added desired results (with correct breathing).
- 15-20 minutes of training total.

It's that easy. Now let's get into what you came for, the ingredients to make your daily diet of mental performance enhancement.

Mental Approach: What it is and how to make your own

In short, your mental approach is essentially the specific way you train your mind to work for you rather than against you when you're performing in your respective sport. It is your fallback and your primary focus from start to finish in every game.

You can think of it this way: Your body already knows how to throw a pitch, run a play, run a race, shoot your shot, swing your club, and swing your bat—that's the physical part, you already have the "muscle memory" that you've built through deliberate physical practice. However, your mental approach is about understanding and focusing on what happens in your head before, during, and after the game you are playing, and more specifically, during the action taking place during the game, such as the at-bat, the play, or the race. It is the conscious choice to focus your thoughts on things you can actually control—such as seeing the ball, staying relaxed, executing your team plays, and executing your plan—rather than letting your mind wander to distractions like fear of failure, what your parents/coaches think, or obsessing over your statistics/playing time.

With that being said, why should you have a mental approach? Because your mental state directly affects what you see and how your muscles respond. When your head is cluttered with worry, self-doubt, or trying too hard, your muscles tense up, you don't execute plays, you lose concentration, you don’t track the ball well, and you ARE NOT in the present moment– everything falls apart, and you perform sub-optimally.

A mental approach gives you a system—a repeatable way of thinking that keeps you consistent even when things aren't going well. A mental approach may be better described as a “microtask,” but it is only “micro” in that it is simple and easy

to remember. The efficacy of a mental approach is really "macro" (very important) for achieving consistent, optimal performance. It's the difference between operating from your "optimal state" (clear, focused thinking) versus your "emotional state" (panic, frustration, distraction). Without this mental discipline, you're essentially leaving your performance to chance and to feelings, which are fluid and constantly change.

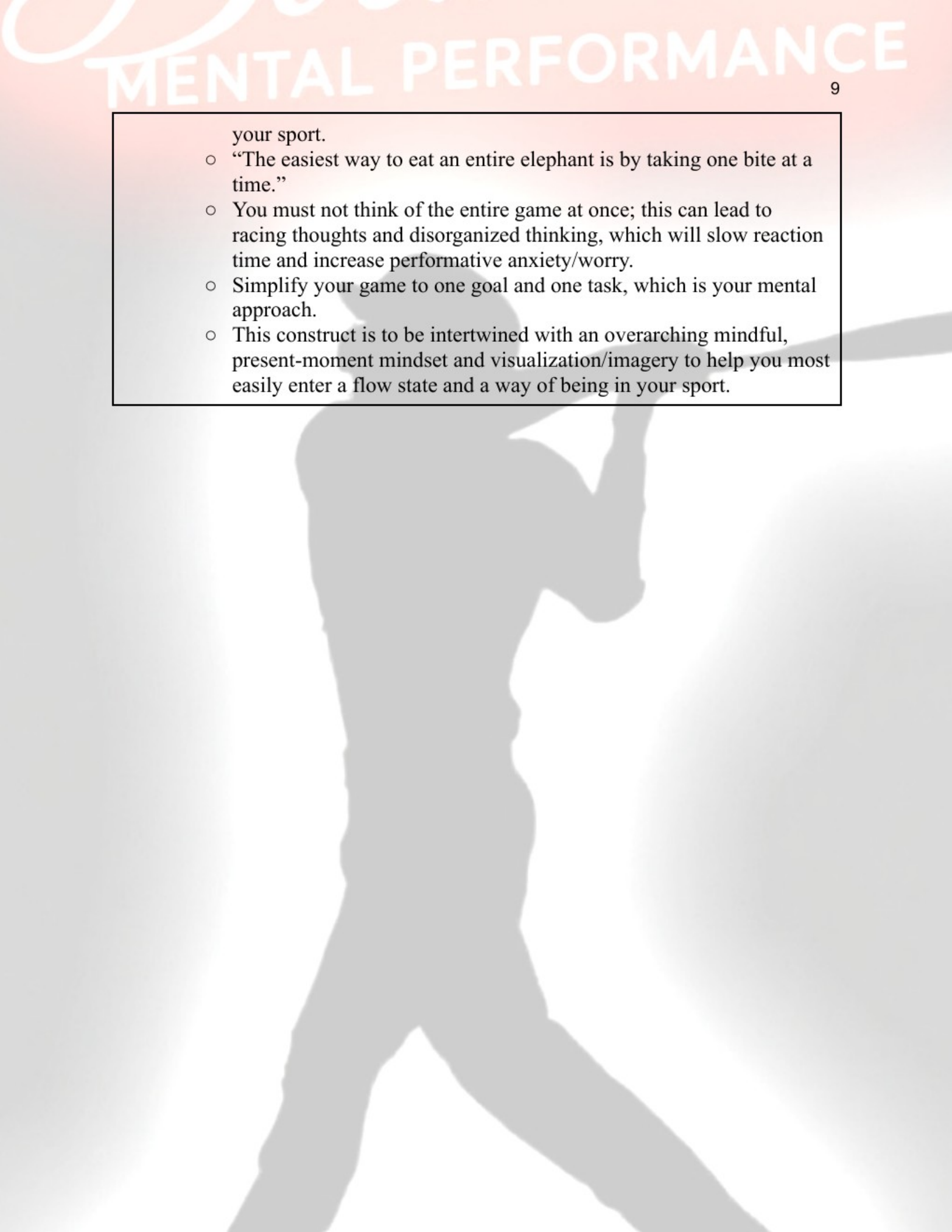
In short, ability and physical practice get you in the game, but your mental approach determines whether you can actually *use* that ability consistently and optimally.

Mental Approaches or "game plan"
• A mental approach or "game plan," if you will, is quintessential for peak mental performance. • Having a mental approach will help you set a specific "microtask" or something similar to stay focused and "keep your head in the game."

• **Building your mental approach:**
  ○ Think about a small but significant task that is easy to remember and quick to fall back on while you are competing in a game.
  ○ EXAMPLES: a baseball player's mental approach might be "just see the ball," "be easy," "catch it with your bat," "make the pitch, clear the brain." A basketball player might be "see the rim" when shooting, "run the play," "one play at a time," "I'm in the game," "block out, rebound," (may be dependent on your specific role on the team). A golfer might be "ball," "let it flow," "next shot." A football player might be "task at hand," "my job is ___." A track athlete might be "finish the race."
  ○ Remember, find something that works FOR YOU. It is your approach, and your game.
  ○ Keep it simple and make it relevant to what you will be doing in

your sport.

- "The easiest way to eat an entire elephant is by taking one bite at a time."
- You must not think of the entire game at once; this can lead to racing thoughts and disorganized thinking, which will slow reaction time and increase performative anxiety/worry.
- Simplify your game to one goal and one task, which is your mental approach.
- This construct is to be intertwined with an overarching mindful, present-moment mindset and visualization/imagery to help you most easily enter a flow state and a way of being in your sport.



Proper Breathing: The wind AND the sail of the mind

You take about 20,000 breaths a day, and you don't even realize it. Ironically, being aware of your breathing is the foundation of present-oriented mindset as well. Let's talk about why your breathing may be wrong and how proper breathing is essential to performance enhancement. Most serious amateur or even professional athletes will obsess over their statistics, social media posts, and their technique. However, a very niche community of elite athletes (usually the best of the best in the world) understands that proper breathing is a scientific, empirically based secret for unlocking true, consistent, optimal performance. This is the unpopular truth: most athletes (even the pros) do not breathe effectively. Most people (and athletes) are mouth-breathers during intense stress and high-anxiety performance environments (ironic that this is a long-time insult–calling somebody a "mouth breather"), they never truly understand how to optimize their breathing patterns, and get adequate oxygenation to their brain and bodies for maximal performance results. Mouth breathing leads to lower oxygen delivery to your body, elevates your body's stress response, clouds your brain, and significantly decreases your chance of performing optimally.

The Physiology of Breathing, and why it matters

Your breathing is what links your conscious and unconscious nervous systems. Interestingly, your breathing is the only internal body function you can manually control, making it the most important controllable factor when performance matters. When breathing, it is especially important that you breathe through your nose (at least inhale through your nose). Why? When you nose-breathe, it triggers a range of physiological changes that immediately enhance performance. Nasal breathing versus mouth breathing isn't something that is up for

personal preference; nasal breathing is a 'must-have' that will allow your mind and body to efficiently respond to stress and the hardships of competition.

When electing to nasal-breathe:

- Nasal breathing delivers more life-giving oxygen to your body and brain. As air flows through your nose, it is naturally warmed, filtered, and purified before reaching your lungs, allowing your body to absorb oxygen more efficiently. This optimized process boosts circulation, energizes your muscles, sharpens your mind, and helps your entire system perform at its best.
- Nasal breathing activates your parasympathetic nervous system—the part of your body responsible for calm and recovery. Specialized receptors in your nose respond to the gentle flow of air and send signals to your brain that promote relaxation, focus, and ease. Instead of feeling tense or overwhelmed like you might in a high-pressure, clutch moment, your body shifts into a state of control, calm, and balance.
- Slow, nasal breathing increases heart rate variability—a powerful sign of a strong, adaptable nervous system. Instead of staying rigid, your heart becomes more flexible and resilient, able to respond smoothly to changing demands. This adaptability allows athletes to shift effortlessly between activation and recovery, stay composed under pressure, and perform at a higher level when it matters most.
- Slow nasal breathing helps your body keep more carbon dioxide—a crucial process for delivering oxygen where it's needed most. While it may seem backwards (carbon dioxide is usually thought of as

poisonous), carbon dioxide retention is the natural process that enables oxygen to be released from your blood into your muscles and brain. When you breathe through your mouth or hyperventilate, you lose too much CO_2, which limits oxygen delivery when performance matters most. Nasal breathing keeps your system efficient, balanced, and ready to perform at its peak.

- Slow nasal breathing activates your vagus nerve—which is your body's reset button. As vagal stimulation increases, your nervous system becomes more balanced, relaxed, and resilient– which enhances emotional control, sharpens decision-making, and helps you stay composed under pressure. This allows you to reset faster, respond smarter, and perform at your best when it counts most.

Research on slow nasal breathing is overwhelmingly positive for performance enhancement. Athletes who elect to continually practice slow and long nasal breathing display improvements in reaction time, quicker decision-making capabilities, sharper attentional focus, and notably better performance in high-pressure situations. All athletes, from Navy SEAL sharpshooters to golfers alike, make deep nasal breathing an absolute priority. They understand that controlling their breathing is controlling their performance.

The Mental Component: Breathing as your Anchor

Now that you understand the importance and physiology of breathing, and why correct breathing objectively supports performance enhancement,

let's talk about why it anchors you to a strong mental game. When the game is on the line, the pressure is boiling, and doubt creeps into your mind, you can fall back on the one thing that is controllable, no matter the game scenario–your breath.

You can think about it this way: your breathing is the cord that generates power and connects your present-oriented mindset, your visualization/imagery, and your mental approach to the literal execution of your performance. When recalling and carrying out your mental approach (the microtask we discussed earlier), you will do so while maintaining a slow, intentional, nasal-breathing pattern.

The combination of you simultaneously focusing your mind on breathing (with benefits in and of itself) and being in the present moment can create the neurological substrate for the flow state to take place. Flow is a state in which many athletes have stellar performances (3 home run games, high-scoring basketball games, many passes completed in a football game, and many tackles in a football game). Your brain cannot physically overthink or over-worry when breathing slowly; the anatomy will not allow it.

With that, deep nasal breathing physiologically triggers diaphragmatic breathing, which is breathing from your belly rather than your chest. With this deeper, fuller breathing pattern, oxygenation occurs much more effectively, allowing for parasympathetic nervous system activation. Chest breathing will

do the opposite; it enables the brain's stress cycle.

Building Your Breathing Practice

As mentioned before, mastering your breathing will require you to deliberately practice it as part of your mental performance routine. You should not expect to just show up and remember to do it. You should practice your breathing for at least 5-10 minutes per day, 4-6 days per week.

You should start your mental performance routine with strong, deep, nasal breathing practice.

Start your mental performance routine with one of the following breathing techniques. The goal is to train your nervous system to recognize and default to this calm, focused state. Over time, you'll be able to gain this state more quickly during competition.

Breathing Techniques (for recovery and present-moment implementation)

- **Slow-Paced Breathing**
- **Purpose:** Slow-paced breathing is designed to reduce physical arousal, enhance vagal activity, and support focus, emotional control, and recovery.
- **How it works (brief):** SPB slows breathing to under 10 breaths per minute, with ~6 breaths per minute being optimal. This pattern increases parasympathetic (vagal) activation, improves heart–brain communication, and supports cognitive and emotional regulation.
- Technique (6 breaths per minute):
    - Inhale through the nose for 5 seconds
    - Exhale through the nose or mouth for 5 seconds

- No breath holds
- Maintain a smooth, relaxed rhythm
- Continue for 2–5 minutes

- **When to use:**
  - Before competition or practice, to regulate arousal
  - During rest periods or recovery between sets
  - After training or competition, to accelerate recovery

- **5-7-3 Technique**
- **Technique:**
  - Inhale through the nose for 5 seconds
  - Exhale for 7 seconds
  - Hold your breath out for 3 seconds
  - Repeat for 2–3 minutes, or as needed
- **Why it works:**
  - The longer exhale and brief pause after breathing out slows the heart rate and reduces physiological arousal, helping restore calm and composure during competition.

- **Box Breathing**
- **Technique:**
  - Inhale through the nose for 4 seconds
  - Hold for 4 seconds
  - Exhale through the nose for 4 seconds
  - Hold for 4 seconds
  - Repeat for 2–5 minutes
- **Why it works:**
  - The equal timing quickly stabilizes breathing and nervous system activity, helping reduce stress and regain control under pressure. Best used when anxiety rises suddenly during competition.

- **4-7-8 Technique**
- **Technique:**
  - Inhale through the nose for 4 seconds
  - Hold for 7 seconds
  - Exhale slowly through the mouth for 8 seconds

- Repeat for 3–5 minutes

- **Why it works:**
  The extended exhale strongly activates the parasympathetic (vagal) response, promoting deep relaxation. Best used for post-competition recovery or calming heightened anxiety before important moments.

- **Coherent Breathing**
- **Technique:**
  - Inhale through the nose for 6 seconds
  - Exhale through the nose for 6 seconds
  - Repeat for as long as necessary
- **Why it works:**
  - Equal, slow breathing synchronizes heart rate and breathing rhythms, promoting autonomic balance and sustained focus. Useful when you want to stay calm, present, and controlled without becoming overly relaxed.

Begin each mental performance session with 3-5 minutes of nasal breathing using one of the above techniques. This primes your nervous system for the visualization and mental approach work that follows. As you progress, integrate this breathing pattern into your visualization practice—perform your mental imagery while maintaining slow nasal breathing. This creates a powerful association: when you're executing your mental approach during competition and you remember to breathe slowly through your nose, your brain will automatically access the calm, focused state you've trained.

The Competitive Edge

What separates good athletes from great ones is that great athletes have trained their nervous systems to stay calm and focused when everyone else is crumbling under pressure. They've practiced breathing so deliberately that it becomes automatic under pressure. When you need to perform well, and when the game is on the line, you won't have to *think* about breathing—you will just do it habitually. And because you do, your thinking has the opportunity stays clear, your reactions can stay sharp, and your performance can stay optimal.

This is your competitive advantage. While most athletes are leaving their mental performance to chance, and hoping that they are ready, you'll be the one with a trained nervous system, a controlled breath, and a focused mind. You'll be the one who thrives under pressure instead of choking under it.

Present-Moment Mindset: how to stay locked into the Moment

Thus far, in this manual, you have successfully learned 2 of the 4 pillars of a mental performance routine. The 3rd pillar of your mental performance routine is establishing your present moment-oriented mindset. This is the most applied skill to have, as it should be the basis of your way of being, while performing in game for your respective sport. Maintaining what you have learned from the previous section, proper breathing (deep breaths in through the nose), is essential to having a

present moment mindset while in competition. Having a present moment mindset is all about training your mind to live where the performance takes place–this very play, pitch, or moment in the game.

To help you piece all of the steps together, your mental approach is your task, it is what you choose to focus on in order to achieve optimal performance and limit distractions, proper breathing is your stabilization–how you regulate your mind and body to stay calm and keep your mental approach focus, the present moment is where your attention actually lives, and it is the way of being that you must adopt in order for all of the pillars (mental approach, breathing, present moment mindset, and visualization/imagery) to blend together and enhance your performance.

What is a Present-Moment Mindset?

A present-moment mindset is essentially the phenomena of your full undivided attention being anchored into the RIGHT NOW–which is your mental approach, your environment, the task at hand, and most importantly–YOUR MINDSET. It is the complete opposite of mindlessness, which is your mind freely wandering with no regard for what thoughts may or may not pop up, or living in the past or the future. This may be a reiteration of what every great coach preaches, but you CANNOT change the past or predict the future, no matter how much you think about it.

When you are fully present in the current moment:

- You are not replaying a past mistake
- You are not counting your stats
- You are not trying to predict the future
- You are not comparing yourself to teammates or opponents
- You ARE fully immersed into the game, your approach, and your breathing

AND THAT is 'keeping your head in the game.'

Great athletes who are fully in the moment may describe this state of being as being 'locked in,' 'in the game,' or 'in the zone.' They react faster, move smoother, and their actions are automatic, without much thought. In fact, they are not aware of their thoughts much at all, positive or negative. They are absorbed into the game, they are apart of the game, and they ARE the game, not just 'playing' the game.

Having a present moment mindset allows for the potential of 'flow' to happen. Flow is the scientific term for playing unconsciously, it is the state players are playing in when they have a career season or a career-best game. You cannot force 'flow' to take place, but having a present-moment mindset sets the stage for flow to take place.

A present moment mindset is not:

- Forcing relaxation
- Forcing positive thoughts only
- Trying to suppress anxiety or worry

It is the skill of not letting nerves, doubts, worry, or frustration run your mind, and furthermore run the game. When having a mindset that lives in the present

moment, you notice these feelings, but you do not feed into them, you simply accept them as naturally occurring happenings of the mind. Your attention lays in what you value, which is your mental approach, breathing, and ultimate attention on the tasks at hand.

Why a Present Moment Mindset Works

When mistakes happen in the heat of competition, it is not usually because you forgot how to perform or because things went wrong, it is because your attention was not in the moment. For example, you may miss a block, miss a couple of shots, or strikeout a couple of times; your mind will not help but to wander to absolutes such as “I can’t miss again or coach will pull me,” “I have to get a hit next at-bat to stay in the lineup,” “People are probably laughing at me.”

This “mental time travel” (whether it be about past mistakes or what needs to happen in the future) has vast adverse effects on performance.

- Muscles tighten.
- Vision narrows in the wrong way (you stop tracking the play well).
- Decision-making slows down.
- You get pulled out of the automatic, trained movement patterns you’ve built.

What a present moment mindset takes is for you, the player, to train your mind to stay in the ‘now,’ and stay on the field/court. It is a skill that can and must be developed. With a present moment mindset, you are not training your brain to not have thoughts, to eliminate emotions, you are simply training your brain to accept them as they are, and not let it effect or dictate your next step.

Some other popular phrases amongst coaches that essentially state this same principle consist of:

- "Stay in the moment."
- "Next play."
- "Focus on your job."
- "Control what you can control."

These phrases are all different ways of stating this present-moment skill: keeping your attention on this rep, this pitch, and this play–and nothing else.

The Science Behind Being Where Your Feet Are

Contemporary research on attention and emotions and their relation to optimal performance supports the construct of a present moment mindset. Your brain has a limited capacity of what and how much attention it can hold, when those resources are spent on worry, dread of the future, and rumination of the past, you have significantly less capability to hold attention on what matters for optimal performance, the present moment.

Training a present-moment mindset builds three key attention skills:

- Aiming attention – choosing what to focus on (your mental approach)
- Sustaining attention – keeping it there

- Regaining attention – noticing when you've drifted and bringing it back

That third piece—regaining attention—is huge. Your mind *will* wander. The skill is noticing that quickly and returning to your task without drama. Every rep you spend practicing this is like lifting a weight for your "brain focus muscle."

When you have distressing thoughts, trying to not to think about it or block it out actually causes the thought to recur more and stronger. "Try not to think about a pink elephant." I guarantee that your mind went directly to a pink elephant.

- "Don't think about that mistake"
- "Don't think about that bad play"
- "Don't think about coach just yelling at me"
- "Don't think about getting taken out of the lineup"

When you are trying to block out stressful thoughts, your brain subconsciously wants to bring it back up to make sure that you are avoiding it, that is the 'lizard brain' which is a whole other scientific conversation.

Practicing a present moment mindset will allow you to:

- Notice performance inhibiting thoughts (stressful ones)
- Accept that they are there
- Redirect your attention back to task-relevant cues (breathing and mental

approach)

Instead of fighting thoughts internally, you are focusing on the outside stimuli–which reduces the noise interfering with performance.

The Role of Breathing in Staying Present

The previous section on breathing explained how slow nasal breathing calms and stabalizes your nervous system. When combined with a present-moment mindset, it becomes the bridge between your performance and your attention.

Here's how they work together:

- When you notice your mind wandering, racing, or being distracted–your first move is not to argue with thoughts—it's to come back to your breath.
- The act of feeling the air move in and out, counting the seconds, or noticing the rise and fall of your chest/belly pulls your attention out of the future/past and back into your body.
- From there, you plug back into your mental approach ("see the ball," "run the play," "one rep at a time").

Breathing + present focus + mental approach = a simple three-step reset you can use anytime:

1. Notice you're not present (you're worrying, replaying, spiraling).
2. Breathe once or twice with intention (slow nasal inhale, controlled exhale).

3. Return to your chosen cue (your microtask).

Every time you run that cycle, you are literally training your brain to recover faster from distractions.

Experiment with, try, and add some of these exercises to your mental performance routine:

Present-Moment Mindset Skills Techniques

- **Having a 'Game Time Phrase' or "cue"**
  - Your mind will wander. That's normal. The key is how quickly you catch it and return. A short phrase—your *game-time phrase*—acts like a verbal compass that points you back to the present.
  - This skill will help you develop a cue phrase or mantra to help you stay in the present moment.
  - Come up with your own personal phrase that you can tell yourself while in-game that will remind you to stay "present-focused" or "in the game."
  - This Phrase should be short and easy to remember.
  - For example, some popular mantras used by professional athletes:
    - "One play at a time" Tom Brady
    - "Catch it" Barry Bonds
    - "Mamba Mentality" Kobe Bryant
    - "One step at a time, one punch at a time, one round at a time" Rocky Balboa
    - "Eye of the Tiger" Apollo Creed
    - "Not too high, not too low" Aaron Judge
    - "Stay calm, remain steadfast and resilient" Shai Gilgeous-Alexander
    - "Let it Flow"

- "Right now"
- "Stay here"
- "I'm playing __(insert sport)___ right now"
- "Be present"
- "Rhythm"
- "Be easy"
- "See the ball"
- A favorite Bible Verse

- **How to Train this:**
  - Start with 2–3 minutes of slow nasal breathing.
  - Bring your mental approach (your "microtask" from the earlier section) to mind.
  - Pair it with your game-time phrase. For example:
    - Mental approach: "See the ball out of the hand."
    - Game-time phrase: "See it."
  - On each exhale, quietly repeat your phrase in your mind.
  - When your mind wanders—and it will—notice it, and come back to the phrase and your breath.

In competition, you'll use the same rhythm: one slow breath + one internal phrase before a serve, pitch, shot, free throw, snap, or rep. It becomes a tiny reset button you can press over and over.

- **Mindful/Present Moment Focus of your game plan or mental approach (see mental approach)**
  - This exercise is the baseline and foundational frontline meditative technique to help recreate an "in the zone" feeling while in-game.
  - See the mental approach section to outline and understand what your mental approach should/will be while in-game.
  - Starting with a few deep breaths, and getting yourself into the present moment, think about your mental approach, and what it should be while you are in the game.
  - While keeping your mindful breathing, keep your focus on your mental approach, and what you will do in-game.
  - This can be paired with visualization to help you remember what your focus should be while in-game.

- Do this exercise for 3-5 minutes.

- **"Staying Present" Breath Counting Method**
  - The purpose of this exercise is to build focus, concentration, and mindful awareness of the present moment by way of your nasal breathing.
  - Close your eyes and take a couple of deep breaths (through the nose).
  - Count your first deep breath (deep belly breath in through your nose, and out slowly through your mouth or nose).
  - The entire breath (in and out) should take about 10-15 seconds.
  - While performing each breath, keep your focus present on the corresponding number (1.. 2.. 3.. So forth)
  - Repeat until counting all the way to 8 or 10.
  - If feeling confident, add music to challenge yourself to hold the focus of your count.
  - If you lose track of the count, or your thoughts completely take over, don't get frustrated. That moment of *realizing* you drifted is actually the rep that makes you stronger. Just gently restart at "One" and keep going.

- **Present-Concentration Positive Object Focus**
  - In competition, you're constantly surrounded by movement, noise, and distractions. This exercise strengthens your ability to lock onto one thing and really *see* it, which carries over to seeing the rim, the ball, the strike zone, your lane, or your assignment more clearly.
  - Simply take a gaze around your current environment (outdoors, locker room, classroom, bedroom, etc.)
  - Locate an object that particularly sticks out to you or might bring you a sense of calm (could possibly be a Gatorade bottle, shaving cream bottle, animal, nature, picture, or another object).
  - Ask yourself, "What do I like about this object?"
  - While maintaining your mindful, deep nose breathing technique, simply close your eyes and try to recreate an image of this object in your mind.
  - Try to piece together all of the details of this object for the most clear, real-life depiction of your chosen object (for example, if a

Gatorade bottle, picture the logo, the lid, the fine print, and the substance and color of the drink).
- Do this for 3–5 minutes. You're practicing staying with one visual target without being dragged away by everything else. That's the same skill you need when you step into the batter's box, walk to the free-throw line, stand over a putt, or approach the starting blocks.

- **On-Task Object-focused imagery/mindfulness practice**
  - This drill connects present-moment attention to a *specific* piece of your sport. Instead of just imagining your whole game, you laser in on one key target—the ball, the rim, the defense, the finish line, the zone.
  - For example, a golfer might use this practice, entailing imagery and visualization, in a meditative state, to simply direct all of his or her focus on the image of the golf ball he or she is about to hit.
  - Simply take a few, mindful, deep breaths– where your focus lies in the present moment and the imagined task/image at hand.
  - Use your imagery/visualization skills to imagine a specific "memory" of a sporting object that will be the task of focus for this exercise.
  - EXAMPLE: A basketball player may imagine an image of the hoop, a baseball player may imagine the pitcher right before he released the ball to home plate, a quarterback may image the defense in its entirety, a track athlete may image the finish line, a golfer may image the ball on a tee, a hunter may imagine the image of a deer or duck they are about to shoot, etc.
  - Remember, make the image from your POV, from how you will see your target in-game, and this is supposed to be a "pictured" image, not a sequence of actions.
  - While keeping your breath deep and long, simply focus on the image that you have created in your head. If your focus breaks, don't fight it, but simply guide it back to your desired image.
  - Work this for 2–3 minutes. The goal is not to rehearse a full highlight reel; it's to train the ability to place all of your mental light on one game-relevant point and stay there.

- **Present-Mindset Competition Concentration**

- Pressure often spikes when you think about who you're up against—a star on the other team, a dominant pitcher, a defender who's been talking trash, a rival school, or a big tournament. This drill is designed to let you mentally "face" your competition without getting overwhelmed, and to connect that image to your breathing and your plan.
- Close your eyes and begin your mindful breathing (deep belly breaths in through your nose and out slowly).
- Now simply imagine your competition or opposing competitor (eg. basketball- the player you are guarding or who is guarding you; football- the player who is in front of you on the line of scrimmage or the whole defense/offense; baseball- the pitcher at his point of releasing the pitch or the strike zone at your point of release during your pitch.
- Keeping your eyes closed, your focus present, and your breaths deep and slow, imagine your task at hand while in the heat of sporting action.
- Keep the image of your opponent in your head, focus on their weaknesses, your approach, and how you will attack them and eventually beat them.
- Do this for 5-7 minutes.

- **Relax-Reset-Compete: VMBR-style reset training:**
  - Find a somewhat relaxing setting with privacy and relative quiet.
  - Pair this exercise with your nasal breathing.
  - Imagine the most relaxing environment you can think of, possibly a favorite fishing spot, a beach, a golf course, out in nature or your favorite place to be.
  - Try to imagine the texture of walking in this place barefoot
  - Imagine the smells, the sounds, the scenery, and try to immerse yourself fully in this imagined environment.
  - Stay here for 2 min.
  - Imagine like a DreamWorks movie intro, your clouds shift into a blank TV screen, just black.
  - Continue to relax and breathe for about 30 seconds.
  - Return to your imagined environment for 2 min.
  - Return to your blank screen for 30 seconds.

    - Next, Shift to your performance environment, for 2 minutes imagine yourself competing.
- This technique allows you to adopt the sensation of relaxation and awareness of your imagined paradise that allows you to build the ability to control the images in your brain, and transfer this relaxed feeling into your visualization of competition.

- **How did I get better today? (Structured Meditation Practice)- Cameron Phillips**
- A present-moment mindset isn't just for game time; it's also about how you relate to your daily journey. Instead of racing through days on autopilot, this exercise helps you pause, breathe, and recognize your progress. That builds confidence and keeps you connected to *why* you do the work.
- This exercise will allow you to affirm and become aware of your goals, accomplishments, and the everyday improvements in your journey as an athlete.
- Do this exercise paired with slow, deep breaths in through the nose and slow, exhales out of the mouth/nose.
- As you do your deep breaths, and are present within the moment, think about one thing in your life that you are grateful/thankful for (food, car, video game, etc.)
- Next, think about something "good" or joyful that happened this particular day (seeing something cool in nature, laughing with your friends in class, something that brought you glee, etc.)
- Next (still keeping your breaths deep and present focused), think about something new that you learned how to do on this particular day (new school concept, historical fact, team play, new technique, etc.).
- Finally, think about something that you got done, or an accomplishment that you had on this particular day (A+ on a test, got a workout in, ate enough calories, did my homework, etc.).
- Feel free to do this exercise as often as possible, and journal your responses for tracking.

Visualization/Imagery: Mental Rehearsal Skills

Let's first clarify what visualization/mental imagery is and what it is not. When you hear the term "imagery," it is easy to think vaguely of it as "positive thinking" or "daydreaming." This is not at all what mental imagery is when thinking about performance enhancement, it is a literal foundational exercise that should be taken as serious as your other mental performance exercises (mental approach, breathing, present-moment mindset). In fact, visualization should make up about half of your mental performance routine. Visualization is specific and powerful for performance enhancement.

What is visualization/mental imagery?

Imagery or visualization (both terms can be used interchangeably) is the deliberate, intentional, and VIVID re-creation of sport experience in your mind using your senses, memory, and feedback. You are not just "seeing yourself play," you are:

- Seeing what you would see on the field, court, or track
- Feeling what you would feel in your muscles and joints
- Hearing the sounds around you
- Experiencing the same emotions, focus, and confidence you want in competition

Crucially, you are doing this with a purpose and clear intention while fully awake and in control of what you are visualizing.

Research has shown mental imagery as a multi-sensory and multi-perceptual activity that enacts your brain responding as if the imagined events were actually taking place. Its really a cool process, and makes for excellent practice without even stepping onto the field. It is an absolute necessity for your mental performance routine. Imagery is also thought of as mental rehearsal or mental simulation because you are literally performing your desired results and activity in your head, and here is the cool part: your brain does not differentiate between mental imagery and literal motor actions.

The Science of Mental Imagery

Imagery is grounded in neuroscience, and it has shown to boost performance time and time again. When you vividly imagine performing in your sport many of the same brain areas fire as when you literally physically execute that performance. Studies have shown overlapping activation in the motor region of the brain (premotor cortex) as well as the underlying networks that are responsible for planning and coordinating the actions. In simple terms: when you repeatedly visualize performing a skill in your mind, your brain treats it the same as physical practice.

When you imagine yourself performing an action, the planning circuits of your brain activate and simulate the action without fully sending the signal to your muscles to respond. Furthermore, as a good note, your muscles do act before your brain tells them to do anything, it happens in your BRAIN first. Therefore, enhancing your neural pathways with visualization practice creates faster reaction time, accurate prediction, and full readiness for when the actual event takes place in real life.

With time, as you practice imagery, these pathways get stronger and make for smoother output of actions. Furthermore, the PETTLEP model of imagery (physical, environment, task, timing, learning, emotion, perspective) posits that the closer that your imagery emulates the real situation, the stronger the imagery becomes and the more it benefits your performance. The PETTLEP model posits these functions, if you perform your visualization in:

- The same body position (Physical)
- The same venue or environment (Environment)
- The same task demands (Task)
- The same speed and rhythm (Timing)
- The appropriate for your current learning stage (Learning)
- The same emotions and intensity (Emotion)
- The same useful point of view (Perspective: seeing through your own eyes or from the outside)

Then the more that your brain treats your imagery as functionally equivalent to the actual performance being carried out–your nervous system cannot easily tell the difference between imagery and literal motor execution.

Additionally, practicing imagery doesn't just activate your motor responses, it helps your heartrate, breathing, and muscle tension to adjust to a performance state. Practicing imagery allows you to get used to pressure, practice composure, and become familiar with performance-requiring moments.

Why you should add imagery/visualization to your mental routine:

Much evidence supports the construct that visualization/mental imagery. It has shown that imagery, when added to weight training and technique training, improves performance compared to athletes who only physically practiced.

It has been shown that visualization/imagery:

- Increases sport confidence: athletes who use imagery systematically report higher belief in their abilities, and interventions that target mastery imagery can *raise* confidence and ease the generation of strong images
- Improves emotional readiness: athletes using motivational imagery report better pre-performance emotional states and more helpful interpretations of anxiety
- Supports focus: imagery helps you lock onto relevant cues and routines, making it easier to ignore distractions and irrelevant thoughts

These psychological benefits are not "soft" extras—they directly influence performance under pressure.

There is a clear relationship between:

- Imagery ability (how vivid and controllable your images are)
- Imagery use (how often and how deliberately you use it)
- Performance

If you commit to adding imagery to your mental performance routine, you can expect benefits in several key areas

a. Sharper technique

- Movements feel more automatic and coordinated
- You make fewer “mechanical” mistakes under pressure
- Skills hold up better when you’re tired or stressed

You’re essentially strengthening the software (movement patterns and decisions) that your hardware (body) runs.

b. Faster, calmer decision-making

- You recognize patterns more quickly: you’ve mentally rehearsed them
- You’re less likely to freeze or panic in unusual situations
- Your choices feel more intuitive and confident

Imagery lets you ‘predict’ scenarios in advance so your brain is not solving them for the first time in real time.

c. Greater confidence and trust in your training

- You've "seen yourself succeed" thousands of times before you actually do
- You carry a stronger sense of "I know what I'm doing; I've done this" into competition
- You rely less on external validation and more on an internal sense of readiness

This is not fake confidence; it's built on repeated internal experiences of executing well.

d. Better control of nerves and energy

- You recognize your own pre-performance patterns of anxiety and arousal
- You have a practiced mental script for how to respond: breathing, self-talk, focus cues
- Big stages and high-pressure moments feel more familiar and less overwhelming

You're not trying to *avoid* feeling anything; you're prepared to work with what you feel.

e. Stronger resilience and mental toughness

- You've rehearsed bouncing back from errors instead of unraveling
- You understand, at a gut level, that mistakes are part of the process, not the end of it
- You maintain composure and presence across an entire performance, not just at the start

Mental Imagery is is the last leg of the table that you NEED to add to your mental performance routine. Add one of the following to your mental performance routine:

Visualization/Imagery Skills Training Techniques

- **Cognitive-Specific (CS) Mental Imagery**
- Choose a single movement you want to improve
- Examples:
  - Baseball At-Bat
  - Free-throw shooting motion
  - Golf swing sequence
  - Blocking technique
  - Punch, kick, or takedown entry
- **Find a quiet, distraction-free environment**
  - Sitting or standing is fine
  - Being in a game-like environment is *not* required
- **Begin with controlled breathing**
  - Take 3–5 slow, deep breaths
  - Use breathing to settle into a present-moment focus
- **Visualize the movement in detail**
  - Rehearse the skill step-by-step
- **Focus on:**
  - body positioning
  - muscle engagement
  - timing and rhythm
  - balance and spatial awareness
- Visualize the movement as if watching yourself perform it clearly and precisely
- **Maintain a steady, focused pace**
  - Do not rush the image
  - Allow the movement to unfold naturally
- **Repeat the same skill multiple times**
  - Use consistent imagery each repetition
  - Emphasize smoothness and accuracy over speed

- **Practice this for 5-10 minutes**

- **PETTLEP visualization/imagery**
  - This exercise is more modern and grounded in vast evidence for its efficacy in performance enhancement with respect to athletic performance.
  - Makes imagery more realistic and life-like.
  - Remembering the acronym:
    - Physical
    - Environmental
    - Task
    - Timing
    - Learning
    - Emotion
    - Perspective
  - Perform this visualization with these factors kept in mind.
  - This exercise is designed to be carried out through a more realistic and life-like procedure.
  - For example, if you were a basketball player, you might use this visualization while standing at the free-throw line at your gym or at your goal outside your house. Or, if you were a baseball player, you might perform this visualization standing up in your batting stance or through the motions of your pitching delivery.
  - The goal is to make this exercise realistic and entail the factors listed above.
  - Find your space, either outside, inside, or ultimately wherever is most feasible for you to carry out this exercise (being in a non-gamelike area is perfectly fine)
  - While physically embodying the factors listed above (such as maintaining your stance or game-like posture), imagine performing in your sport.
  - Literally go through the motions of how you would carry out your sport while simultaneously imagining how it should play out successfully in your mind.
  - EXAMPLE: Aaron Rodgers was once seen taking imaginary snaps in the red zone of the Green Bay practice facility, physically executing the play and making a pass, all by himself with no other players around (he probably looked like he was hallucinating while doing it).

- Do this for 5-10 minutes

- **Split-Frame Visualization (Advanced, Experimental, and Theoretical):**
  - Watch a video of yourself performing your prospective sport (Baseball swing, Football/Basketball highlight, etc.)
  - Watch this video back a couple of times
  - While you watch the video (from a third-person POV), simultaneously imagine yourself performing in the play from a first-person POV (from your own perspective).
  - Do this so the timing of the action in the video matches how it plays out in your mind.
  - This way, you get two perspectives to aid your mental visualization.
  - This technique is to be used as an additive to traditional or PETTLEP visualization, not as a replacement.