

Chapter 6

Focus

How many times have you been told to “just focus?” Doesn’t that sound easy? You get your game face on, stare intently, and try even harder to focus. But the harder you try, the more elusive an effective state of focus becomes. Focus skills are extremely important for achieving athletic excellence. However, it is just like the rest of the mental skills we have discussed thus far; it must be practiced through drills to develop the skills. Just check the post-game interviews of coaches and you will often hear the comments, “we weren’t focused” or “we weren’t mentally strong.” Whose fault is it if the athlete is not focused? Has the athlete had the opportunity to practice focus and thereby improve the skill of focus? In this chapter, we will take a look at how important focus is, how to obtain focus and sustain focus over time.

Let’s start off by doing *Activity 6.1 Catching Markers* to illustrate the important of knowing what to focus on.

Activity 6.1 Catching Markers

You will need 10 different colored magic markers to try the following “focus test.” Your task is to throw all 10 markers up at the same time above your head and try to catch as many as possible. It is important that when you attempt to catch them, you only use your hands and your hands must be away from your body (no trapping the markers against your body). Now, throw all 10 up at the same time.

How many did you catch?

If you do this correctly without cheating, then like most people, you probably only caught 1 or 2 at most. Does that mean your ability to focus is very low? Absolutely not! This is an impossible task because there are too many things to focus on all at once. The fact of the matter is: **YOU CAN ONLY CONCENTRATE ON ONE THING WELL AT A TIME.** While you can focus on many things at once, when it comes down to peak performance, you can only focus on one thing well at a time. You better make sure that the one thing you are focusing on is **WHAT’S IMPORTANT!**

Now, pick one special marker in your group of 10 to focus on. For example, let’s say the red one. Take that marker, stick it in the middle of the other 9 and throw all 10 up once again at the same time. Remember, you are focusing on catching only the one red marker.

What happened?

If you didn’t catch the red marker the first time, try it again. If you have relatively decent hand-eye coordination, then you’ll be able to catch that red marker.

As demonstrated in the above activity, our senses are continually bombarded with stimuli. We continuously have internal stimuli such as being hungry, tired, or our numerous thoughts. We often have external stimuli such as people talking or a radio or television playing in the background. It is impossible to become aware of all the sensory information coming into the central nervous system. Once you notice certain sensory information, you must decide what action to take and that process requires focus.

The ability to block out distractors is called focus. Focus involves perceiving sensory information and using it to make decisions and choose responses. The key to focus is to focus on task-relevant stimuli and ignore all others. Imagine how difficult it is to block out all distraction under normal conditions. Now

imagine how much harder it is with a stadium full of fans yelling. To compound the problem of focus, the cues an athlete needs to focus on can often change very quickly. Thus athletes must be able to switch focus depending on the demands of the task.

Success in sport requires the ability to focus your attention on the task. Unfortunately, you can't force focus. The harder you try to focus, the more frustrated you become. To focus, you need to relax and feel confident. Then you need to acquire the ability to block out distraction and become absorbed in the moment of what you are doing. How do you develop focus? Through much practice it becomes permanent. Different events require different types of attention. Robert Nideffer explains the Attentional Dimensions Theory as occurring along two dimensions: width (broad or narrow) and direction (internal or external).

Attentional width refers to how many stimuli athletes need to attend to at any given moment. Attentional direction refers to the athlete focusing inward on thought or outward on events happening around him or her. A broad attentional focus is needed when the runner analyzes the situation to decide when to begin the kick to the finish. A narrow focus is needed when a high jumper begins the approach. An internal attentional focus is important for analyzing what is happening in the event, planning strategy, and reading one's body. An external focus is needed in order to assess a situation and execute sport skills and strategies. Attentional width can be broad or narrow. A broad attention focus involves being sensitive to many things that are going on around you. A narrow attentional focus involves focusing directly in front of you and knocking out your peripheral vision. Attentional direction can be internal or external. An internal attentional focus involves focusing on your own feelings or thoughts. An external attentional cue involves focusing outwardly to other things and people around you.

Consider a runner in an 800-meter race. At the starting line, the runner needs an internal focus to mentally rehearse as he/she walks to the line. Once the gun goes off, the runner must shift to a broad external focus to gauge their speed compared to other runners to be able to place themselves where they want at the cut-in. To pass someone, the focus shifts to the person that will be passed. Another example of shifting focus would be the 300/400 hurdler who uses a broad internal to focus on stride lengths, wind, track conditions, and pace. The hurdler uses a broad external to assess other competitors and a narrow internal for personal race judgment and effort distribution.

A skilled athlete is able to shift on demand among these different attentional styles. Most track and field athletes cannot shift attentional focus this easy and will benefit dramatically from practicing concentration skills.

Some examples of attentional dimension are provided in Table 6.1 to help understand how dimensional attention works.

Table 6.1 Attentional Dimensions Example			
	Broad	Broad	
Internal	You decide to pass when the pace slows	Realize situation for final attempt	External
Internal	Check arousal level and use cue words	See the ball flying through the air	External
	Narrow	Narrow	

Activity 6.2

Concentration Exercise

Practice these exercises on a daily basis for a couple of weeks. Do at least 10 minutes of the previous exercise everyday as your sport psychology homework. How else will you get better if you don't practice?

1. Listen to outside sounds (Broad External): Lie down with eyes closed and just concentrate on the sounds in the environment. (3 minutes)
2. Broad Internal: Monitor sounds of your body: Lie on your back with your eyes closed and fingers in your ears. Focus on all the sounds of the body- growling of stomach, breathing, heartbeat, etc. (2 minutes)
3. Narrow Internal: Flowing thoughts. Lie down and pay particular attention to thoughts that your mind brings to the surface. Perform this with a passive attitude. Recognize the thoughts and allow them to come into and leave the mind at your own pace. (2 minutes)
4. Narrow External: Study an object. Take a small object that can be manipulated in the hand (such as a coin, paper clip, ring) and focus internally on this object. If the mind begins to wander, refocus on the object. Each time you perform this exercise, change the object. (5 minutes)
5. Pick a problem (Narrow Internal): Pick an issue and ask your mind to give you as many solutions as it can. As the mind presents each solution, place it into a bubble and allow it to slowly flow away. Quietly wait on the next solution to appear. (5 minutes)
6. Narrow Internal: Listen to your own heartbeat. Close eyes while in a comfortable position and listen to your heartbeat. Attempt to hear nothing but your own heart beating. (3 minutes)

Activity 6.3

Learn to Focus

1. Take some time and focus on your breathing. See how long you can be aware of your inhalations and exhalations and the movement of your chest without allowing your mind to wander.
2. Pay attention to sounds around you. Notice any voices or noises in your environment. Focus on the noise you hear.
3. Focus on how your body feels. Feel your arms, head, neck, shoulders, stomach, and legs. Notice the feeling of the chair you are sitting in or the pressure of the floor you are standing on.
4. Now attend to your emotions and thoughts. Again, see how long you can maintain focus without your mind wandering.
5. Now choose an object in your environment and look at it. Focus on this object. Now shift your focus to what is happening around you. Shift back to the object. Can you easily shift focus?

In the early stages of learning a skill, you use controlled processing. This requires conscious focus to a full awareness of the actions involved in the skill. This focus is slow, deliberate, and attention demanding, as you are inexperienced at this activity. However, after numerous hours of practice, you develop the ability to perform basic skills automatically, without a lot of conscious thought. This automatic processing is called skill automaticity. This is the focus that occurs during a “flow state” experience. Because automatic processing is not attention demanding, it allows performers to focus on other tasks while executing basic skills and to do several tasks at the same time. Not only do you perform basic skills without conscious thoughts, you will also be able to make smart decisions automatically.

The challenge becomes in recognizing when the attentional system is overloaded (i.e. you have too many markers in the air—Activity 6.1). Here are three tips to help prevent attentional overload.

Simplify the skill when first learning a skill. Use appropriate developmental skill progressions or divide complex skills into meaningful components. For example, in the high jump, a beginning athlete may be thinking of many things, including hitting the bar. Sometimes the bar hurts or it is embarrassing to miss. By jumping without the bar or using a bungee cord, the athlete has reduced the attentional requirements of that event.

Simplify the strategy. For example, if a thrower is having a hard time getting into the proper power position, consider eliminating part of the approach to start in the power position.

Overlearn and automate fundamental skills. As you overlearn skills, rather than thinking about how to execute the skill, you can become more aware of what is around you.

Activities 6.4, 6.5, and 6.6 will illustrate the importance of your thoughts and begin to get you thinking about how you will direct your thoughts to improve your focus.

Activity 6.4 Quiet Your Mind

For the next minute, think about nothing. Empty your mind of all thoughts.

For thought: How did this work?

Wrap-up: It is impossible to completely empty the mind. However, we do have some control over the thoughts that enter our mind and we can direct those thoughts into positive thoughts by using such mental skills as triggers and releases.

Activity 6.5 Focus On What You Can Do

Picture your competition venue in your mind. See the familiar place you practice or have meets at. Now, the challenge is for you to tell yourself to NOT think about a wild lion standing in the middle of the track infield. Again, do not see the wild lion that escaped from the zoo and is standing in the infield.

For Thought: What did you think about? Chances are you thought about the lion in the infield and what in the world it was doing there!

Wrap-up: What typically happens when you tell yourself not do something like, “do not slow down” or “do not focus on your competition.” You think about what you are not supposed to do and often do those things. A more effective strategy is to direct your self-talk so you are telling yourself what to do instead of what not to do.

Activity 6.6
Control the Controllables

Exercise: In column one is a list of some typical uncontrollables. Add five more uncontrollables to the list. In column two, list things you can control.

Uncontrollables	Controllables
your opponent	attitude
the officiating	effort
temperature (hot-cold)	_____
wind	_____
rain	_____
snow	_____
the schedule	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

For Thought: Has focusing on uncontrollables gotten you into trouble before?

Wrap-up: Our focus should be on things we can control. However, it is perfectly natural to periodically think about the uncontrollable. Briefly thinking about an uncontrollable is ok, but you should recognize what you are focusing on is an uncontrollable. Use a release technique to forget about the uncontrollable and use cues to immediately return to focus on something you can control at that moment. One thing that you can learn to control is how you choose to react to the uncontrollable. The ability to shift your focus and stay calm under distractors is an important mental skill that needs to be consistently practiced to become automatic.

When you become distracted by thoughts, other events, and emotions, you do not focus on the proper cues. Physically, your muscles tighten, heart rate goes up, breathing rate goes up, and your mouth becomes dry. Instead of focusing externally on the relevant cues in your environment, your attention becomes narrow and internal as you focus on your own worries and fears of losing and failing. You lose your ability to change focus as the situation dictates. This affects timing, coordination, fatigue, muscle tension, and poor judgment. Your focus will often bring inappropriate cues.

As *Activity 6.1 Catching Markers* illustrated, we can only focus on a limited number of stimuli at one time. Therefore, you must learn which information is critical to performance and direct attention to that. In most cases, learning to focus on the right thing at the right time may be by trial and error and many hours of making mistakes in practice and competition. This process can be improved and made more effective and efficient by learning what cues to focus on. For example, if you are a high jumper and the speed of your approach is vital to your jumping success, by focusing on a cue word such as “attack,” you are developing your selective focus skills.

It is very important to learn what cues to focus on and then develop a mind-set to be alert for those cues. In interactive events such as basketball, football, or volleyball, your focus may be on cues to read your opponents and being prepared to implement your strategy. In non-interactive sports such as bowling or field events in track and field, a more a narrow focus is needed such as focusing on rhythm, acceleration, or exploding.

The development of focusing on important cues should occur in practice. You will find it useful to develop task-relevant, performance-related cue words to help focus on the right information. Two

examples of performance related cues are listed in Table 6.2. Within each event chapter, you will find more detailed performance related cues.

Table 6.2 Performance Related Cues Example		
Basketball	Football	Baseball or Softball
Touch	Square	Smooth
Quick	Attack	Contact
Stay low	Explode	Hustle

Use the examples in Table 6.2 and develop cue words for your event in Activity 6.7 based upon different time phases. Place performance related cue words in your events.

Activity 6.7 Develop Cues for your Event	
Skill	

Having a performance focus plan should be an important part of your routine. Before pilots get ready to fly their airplane, they have to go through a checklist. This checklist ensures that they are ready. Athletes should develop their own checklist. Focus plans for athletic events should specify the focus of attention during the event’s different segments. A well-developed focus plan that is overlearned will prompt the right focus automatically, leading to more opportunities to be in the “flow.”

Expect the Unexpected

Congratulations for stepping up to the challenge to make the commitment to improve your mental skills that will lead to a better performance. However, when you develop the mental skill focus and you know what cues to focus on, it can still be very difficult because of the unexpected events that occur. Any unexpected stimulus is likely to capture your focus. The natural tendency to attend to this type of stimulus is called the orienting response. This orientation response may alert us to focus more on our task. For example, a runner may notice that two people have collided and they must dodge the fallen runners. Athletes must block out these irrelevant distractors and focus on the task at hand. With repeated exposure to the unexpected distraction, athletes can rely on an automatic response. The most effective way to prevent the unwanted orienting response is to make the unexpected expected. Astronauts often train by using flight simulations that purposely have flight and equipment failures that force the astronauts to respond to distractors. A common example of this would be in American football where teams practice their offense with a recording of loud crowd noise to become accustomed to the crowd. Wouldn’t it be nice if excessive crowd noise was a factor in all sports? Although excessive crowd noise is usually not a problem in most sports, there are plenty of other unexpected events that arise that can cause you to lose focus.

In *Activity 6.8 Distractors*, you are asked to list some possible distractors. Use the distractor examples in column 1 and continue to add to the list in column 2 with additional distractors.

We will cover recovery plans in Chapter 7 and in the event-by-event chapters and talk about how to effectively handle distractions that may cause us to lose focus.

Activity 6.8 Distractors	
Distractors	Additional Distractors
Wind	
Rain	
Cold or heat	
Make a turnover	
Fall down	
Officials makes a bad call	
Miss a shot	
Foul or commit a penalty	

Once you achieve focus, how do you sustain it? Although the terms focus and concentration are often used synonymously, they should not be. Concentration is the ability to sustain focus on selected stimuli over time. Helping athletes sustain their concentration skills is a key component of focus training.

Intense concentration is difficult to sustain because it is energy demanding. To maintain focus for a long period of time is draining. Seldom does trying to concentrate yield positive results. Concentration occurs when your mind becomes absorbed in the task, rather than trying to make you focus. When you allow yourself to become completely involved in what you are doing, sustained concentration comes naturally.

In the field events, the multi-events, and in running races with prelims and finals, you need to learn when and how to turn concentration on and off. In situations where you perform, wait, then perform again, concentration must be managed effectively. If you fail at concentration, you will fail to select the correct cues, be prone to being distracted and make poor decisions.

With practice, you will be able to concentrate for longer and longer periods of time. You should spend time in practice sustaining concentration in exactly the same way you must sustain it when competing. Simple activities such as stretching can be turned into a focus activity by focusing closely on what each stretch feels like. If your mind wanders, redirect your attention back to stretching. With practice, you will get better at concentrating. The ability to concentrate requires quieting the mind, focusing on the present, and becoming absorbed in the activity.

There are many roadblocks that you need to overcome if you are to become effective in maintaining your focus. It can be difficult to focus on the present because your mind may wander to the past or think of the future. Your past could be holding onto mistakes you have made and your future might be thinking of the negative things that might occur if you have a bad performance. Or maybe you have already chalked up your victory in your mind and you are focused on how you will celebrate your victory. People have difficulty letting go of a bad mistake. Looking backwards prevents you from focusing on the present. Your mind may be occupied by “what if” questions. What if questions might include: “What if I foul?” “What if I slow down?” “What if I miss?” or “What if I get tired?”

With all the “what if” questions, your mind can become cluttered with excessive thinking. Remember the Walk the Plank activity in Chapter 1? Your lack of trust on the high plank caused your mind to wander and think consciously of keeping your balance and not falling and these negative thoughts interfered with performance, compared to a free mind when walking the plank on the ground. The free mind responds automatically and trusts your training and skills.

Fatigue makes it difficult to sustain focus on the task. When you are tired, your mind is preoccupied with fatigue. Fatigue can make cowards of us all, if we let it. If your focus skills are well developed you will greatly increase your odds of blocking out the feelings of fatigue.

Now that you know more about focus and the roadblocks that get in your way of achieving sustained focus, let’s turn our attention to improving your ability to overcome focus roadblocks.

Triggers

Focus can be improved through the use of triggers. A trigger is an action or words that remind you to focus. Triggers are reminders to focus your attention back to the task at hand. Triggers are used to program the proper image. *Activity 6.9 Triggers* lists some triggers that can be used in implementing your mental plan.

Activity 6.9 Triggers	
Some examples of triggers are given in column one. Can you add more triggers to the list in column two that may help you initiate your own mental plan?	
Example Triggers	Additional Triggers
Look at the implement	
See the foul pole	
Touch your muscles and think of them as coiled springs	
Clap your hands twice quickly	

Releases

A release is a technique that allows you to let go of negative thoughts and feelings that prevent you from concentrating on the present. Releases can also be used to free the mind to focus. An example may be when you enter the locker room, you place your hand on the bench and imagine any problems you have flowing from your mind to the bench. After practice, you can touch the bench and your concerns will flow back into your mind. Similar to the locker room release is the concept of parking thoughts. You can eliminate negative thoughts by parking them in a safe place until after your performance. Identify unwanted thoughts in your mind, write them on paper and place the paper in another location. You will not be concerned about the thoughts you have left on the paper. After your performance is over, go back and un-park the paper by looking at it. At that time, you can address your concerns. Another version of the parking method would be to imagine your problems or concerns parked in the trunk of your car in the parking lot. During the performance, they are safe in the car as you forget about them. After your performance, you can un-park your concerns from your car trunk and deal with them.

Other release examples may be a thrower picking up the shot and imagining the mistake moving into that object, placing the shot on the ground, stepping on the shot, and seeing the mistake going into the ground. Ken Ravizza, a very successful sports psychologist who has done considerable work with baseball takes a small plastic toilet into the baseball dugout and has players flush their bad plays away to put their

problems behind them. Although you probably won't take your toilet to the track, you can make a hand signal as though you were flushing a toilet and achieve the same effect. In fact, you may even buy a small toilet that goes on your key chain to remind you to flush your mistakes.

Another quick technique that you can use to help let go of mistakes could be a garbage dump somewhere in the track venue. The garbage dump is where you put your mistakes and frustration during the meet or practice so they don't distract you. Pick one or more spots or objects around the track before practice or the meet starts. Your spot should be easy to see from the track or competition area. Maybe you choose somewhere in the stands, a landing pit, a flagpole, or maybe even an actual wastebasket. If you make a mistake, deposit it in the garbage dump by taking a quick look at the spot and symbolically leaving the mistake there. Your garbage dump could also be an extra bag you bring along with you.

Use *Activity 6.10 Using Releases* to add to the example of releases you could use.

Activity 6.10 Using Releases	
Some examples of releases are given in column one. Can you add more releases to the list in column two that may help you initiate your own mental plan?	
Release Examples	More Release Techniques
Parking-Imagine trouble in your trunk of car	
Grind mistake into ground	
Wipe hand across shirt to wipe mistake away	
Pick up a blade of grass and throw it in the air	
Use flushing toilet movement with your hand	

All athletes will lose focus at some point no matter how good their focus skills. However, what separates great athletes from average athletes is the ability to quickly regain focus after losing it. Mentally strong athletes have a recovery plan to react to the distracting situation. The keys to the recovery plan are called the 3 R's: recognize, relax, refocus.

Table 6.3 The 3 R's	
Recognize	Recognize you have lost focus and need to regain it.
Relax	Use self-talk and breathing to relax and get back in your proper arousal zone.
Refocus	Re-focus attention on task by using triggers, releases, and cue words.

Activity 6.11 Myself After a Mistake
Think about the last time you made a mistake such as turnover, fouled or missed a shot, committed a penalty or struck out.
When did you recognize you lost focus?
Were you able to relax and get back into the flow of things?
How successful were you in refocusing?
Now that you know about the signs of being in your proper arousal zone, the components of relaxation, and how to re-focus using cue words, how would you respond in a more positive productive manner?
How would you:

Recognize: _____

Relax: _____

Refocus: _____

Where you put your focus is called a focal point. Focal points can be something you feel, see, or hear. Developing a focal point allows you to place your concentration in a pre-determined place and will help distract you from anything negative that will adversely affect performance

Activity 6.12 Focal Points		
<p>Exercise: Use the examples in column one and then list 4 focal points that you can use in column two in a pre-meet/event situation.</p>		
<p>Comment: Because the athletic performance happens quickly, it is difficult to be totally aware of the feeling during the actual flow of performance. Feeling focal points are most often useful before the event, in the pre-performance plan as a tool to stay calm and focused.</p>		
Feeling Focal Points Examples:		Feeling Focal points
Feel the stretch of your muscles		1.
Feel your breathing-the air in and out		2.
Feel your feet on the court or field		3.
Feel an implement or ball in your hands		4.
<p>Visual Focal Points: Visual focal points are points that you only look at before and during competition to keep in your proper arousal zone. Use the examples in column one and then list 4 visual focal points that you can use in column two in a pre-meet/event situation, then 4 you can use during the event.</p>		
Examples	Visual focal points Pre-event	Visual Focal Points During Event
1. Looking at the goal or goal line before you compete	1.	1.
2. Focus on the court or field	2.	2.
3. See yourself doing your event	3.	3.
4. See yourself stretching	4.	4.
<p>Hearing Focal Points: Listen to only those things that get you in the proper arousal zone and make you feel calm and confident.</p>		

Use the examples in column one and then list 4 hearing focal points that you can use in column two in a pre-meet/event situation, then 4 you can use during the event.

Examples	Hearing focal points Pre-event	Hearing Focal Points During Event
1. Negative Sounds	1.	1.
2. Others talking about being scared they are or how big the meet is	2.	2.
3.	3	3.
4.	4.	4.

By developing familiar focal targets, you can consistently increase your focus both before and during your performances. Although we developed several focal points during the activity, I recommend selecting one or two that work for you and develop them.

Use the following activities to help develop your focus skills.

Activity 6.13
Focus Cue Development

Phase 1:

You may use a ball or implement for this exercise. Throwers may use their throwing implement.

Take your shoes or ball or implement and place them five feet away from you. Pick a specific spot on the object to focus your eyes on. Your eyes should stay focused on this spot during the entire exercise.

Place your focus on your breathing. As you inhale feel the energy coming into your body. Feel your stomach rising. As you exhale, feel the stomach loosen and the tension flow out of your body. When you exhale, repeat a cue word to yourself. This word is your concentration cue and keeps you focused.

Common words that may be used are “strong,” “focus,” “relax,” etc. Whenever you feel your focus start to drift from your visual target, use your breathing and cue word to return your focus on the object. Continue to focus on the object until you can focus for three minutes without distractions, then move on to phase 2.

Phase 2:

Turn on music but with very low volume at first. Try to stay focused on your spot for the next minute and a half without getting distracted by the music. Whenever you feel your focus start to drift from your visual target, use your breathing and cue word to return your focus on the object.

Continue to focus on the object until you can focus for two minutes without distractions. When you can focus for two-minutes, increase the volume of the music. When you can focus for one minute without losing focus you are ready for phase 3.

Phase 3:

Place your object directly in front of a TV set. Sit far enough back so that in order for you to still see your object you also see the entire screen. Turn the TV on but with very low volume at first. Try to stay focused on your spot for the next minute and a half without getting distracted by the images on the TV screen. Whenever you feel your focus start to drift from your visual target, use your breathing and cue words to return your focus to the object.

Activity 6.14
Concentration Breathing

Silently say one word related to your event as you inhale and two words related to your event as you exhale. See how many breathing cycles you can go through without letting thoughts wander to something else. Set concentration goals.

What caused you to lose concentration?

Activity 6.15
Stick with my Number

Phase 1: Sit quietly with your eyes closed and your feet flat on the floor. Concentrate on your breathing. When you inhale, feel the energy coming into your body and focus on the feeling in your stomach of the air coming in. When you exhale, feel the air going out, and focus on the number 1. See the number 1 in your mind's eye. Repeat "one" in your head, or you can do a combination. Inhale, feel the breath. Exhale, focus on the number one. This is really quite boring, so you'll find your mind wandering. When your mind wanders, recognize that you've lost the proper focus. Return your concentration to your breathing and the feeling of the air coming in. As you exhale, now focus on the number 2. See the number 2 in your mind's eye, repeat the sound "two" in your head, or do a combination. Each time you lose your focus and drift, add a number. Do this exercise for 2 minutes and see what number you are up to.

Phase 2: Turn on some music and try the same exercise for two minutes.

Activity 6.16
Learn to Maintain Focus

Find a quiet place and choose an object such as the ball or implement. Hold the object in your hands. Get a good sense of how it feels, its texture, color, etc. Put the object down and focus your attention on it. If thoughts wander, bring attention back to the object. Record how long you can maintain your focus on the object. Once you are able to focus for 5 minutes, practice with distractions present. Chart how long you can maintain your attention under these conditions.

Activity 6.17
Concentration Grid Exercise

This exercise helps increase focus and is a fun activity that athletes enjoy participating in.

1. You will need a pencil and a timer. The concentration grid has numbers from 1 to 99 spread out randomly in the grid.
2. Go for one minute and see how many numbers you can cross off, starting at 1 and going up in number.
3. As a means of comparison, people who are able to concentrate effectively and scan well, score in the upper 20's and 30's.
4. Now for the fun part, have somebody distract you. Start at 99 and work down. The person distracting you can use distracting methods other than hitting you.

10	99	43	71	9	76	61	23	96	90
93	21	97	37	86	17	56	4	66	85
89	8	58	80	49	52	29	42	72	19
15	28	54	38	77	95	34	84	13	26
50	92	70	1	24	30	87	59	100	44
64	45	82	63	91	2	12	68	53	33
75	67	39	27	88	14	83	47	98	62
36	3	31	18	60	35	5	78	11	25
81	57	40	73	48	51	65	41	20	94
46	22	7	79	16	32	6	69	74	55

**Table 6.4
Skill Cue Words**

Divide your sport into different skills you need to be successful. For each skill, list two to three things that you will focus on during that skill. Then, list one cue word that will bring everything in that skill into focus.

Skill	Main points to focus on	Cue Word (s)
Start to 1st Hurdle	Get to first hurdle without stutter Set rhythm of race Get out of blocks strong Attack first hurdle	BOOM
Clearing Hurdles	Lead leg attacks hurdle Trail leg drives forward	Rhythm
¾ way through race (6th or 7th hurdle)	Fatigue beginning to set in. Look forward to the challenge	Love it!
After last hurdle	Where the race is made Power through final yards	Relax and use power

Using Table 6.4 as an example, list a skill in your sport in column one and provide “Main Points to Focus on” and Cue Words.

**Activity 6.18
Skill Cue Words**

Divide your sport into different skills you need to be successful. For each skill, list two to three things that you will focus on during that skill. Then, list one cue word that will bring everything in that skill into focus.

Skill	Main points to focus on	Cue Word (s)

Many sport psychologists and coaches believe that the ability to focus is the most important skill an athlete can possess. This important mental skill of the ability to focus is not a natural ability and can be improved by mental drills. We started the chapter with the Catching Markers activity that illustrated how important it is to know what to focus on. We covered the different types of attentional focus and you developed cues to keep you focused on your event. The important skills of using triggers and releases appropriately will allow you to relax and re-focus on achieving the proper arousal level. Finally, you engaged in several mental drills that will help you to achieve and sustain focus.

Successful, mentally strong athletes maintain a positive focus no matter what is going on around them. They stay focused on the next action steps they need to take to get them closer to the fulfillment of their goals rather than all the other distractions that are going on. You are making a commitment to be a mentally strong athlete. Stay focused, go after your dreams, and keep moving toward your goals.