

# ***“Mental Skills Training for Youth Sports”***

*(Ron Jones, MS, Historical Kinesiologist, Physical & Health Educator)*

**Background:** My master’s thesis was *“Mental Skills Training for Youth Sports.”* My exploration of sports psychology enabled me to work at the USA Olympic Training Center with USA Track & Field Elite Development where I assisted, and eventually presented, on mental skills training to assist our future Olympic hopefuls. Sport Psychology is a very deep area to explore! My journey with sports psychology has taken decades, but just knowing a few basics can be a game changer. I’ve condensed the basics of the top five performance interventions everyone should know (Arousal Regulation, Relaxation, Goal Setting, Mental Imagery, & Attention Focus)—plus a few important extras. I hope it helps you optimize both performance *and enjoyment* for youth sport athletes and beyond sports as well.

Play hard—and don’t forget to have fun too! --Coach RJ

## ***Youth Sport Programs***

*Positive youth sport programs can not only improve a child physically, but also psychologically and socially.*

### **Positive Outcomes of Youth Sports:** ☺

- Physically: Learn sport skills, improve health and fitness.
- Psychologically: Develop leadership skills, self-discipline, respect for authority, competitiveness, cooperativeness, sportsmanship, self-confidence, and FUN!
- Socially: Opportunity to become part of expanding network of friends.

### **Negative Outcomes of Youth Sports:** ☹

- Excessive *physical and/or psychological stress* on youth athletes.
- Rob youngsters of benefits of *spontaneous play*.
- Develop *antisocial attitudes* and behaviors by encouraging cheating, aggression, and at times even violence.
- Conducted primarily to satisfy *self-serving interests of adults* who try to achieve glory through young athletes.

**Sport Dropouts:** The primary reason kids drop out of sports is a *shift of interests* to other involvements (especially with adolescents). The second major reason kids drop out of sports is because of *negative sport experiences* such as not playing enough, poor relationships, overemphasis upon winning, boredom, and excessive fear of failure. About 30-40% of dropouts are because of negative sport experiences.

## ***Philosophy of Youth Sports***

Youth sport programs can be wonderful and enriching experiences for young athletes. Unfortunately, sometimes adults ruin the quality of experience for kids and take away the joy for sport by imposing adult stressors on children. Adults can turn an enjoyable activity into a pressurized, competitive nightmare.

**Sport Models:** There are two basic sport models. One is for children and the second is for adults. Kids are NOT pros! Youth sports should be “developmental” while adult professional sports are for entertainment and making money which are facilitated by “winning.”

- **Developmental Model of Sport-CHILD:** (Goal=Develop the Individual) Most important product is not wins or dollars but the “quality of experience” for the child. Sport is an educational process where children learn about life through sport. Winning is one long-term goal but not the “primary” goal.
- **Professional Model of Sport-ADULT:** (Goal=Entertainment & Make Money!) Winning is the priority goal because financial success depends upon win/loss records. Players are commodities to be bought, traded, and sold.

**Winning:** Winning is neither everything—nor the only thing. Young athletes should be taught that success is *“striving for victory”* by focusing on their *“best effort.”* The effort should be first directed towards learning sport skills then improving the skills and then towards victory. Focusing on skill development then skill performance is being oriented to the “task” rather than oriented to the “outcome.” Maximum effort and executing skills well will facilitate winning.

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## ***Winning Out of Perspective***

- Displays of comradeship with an opponent is considered a sign of weakness or when laughter is judged to be a lack of competitiveness.
- Adult instructs athletes in strategies designed to take unfair advantage of an opponent.
- Youngsters given drugs, coaxed to cheat, and intimidated to excel.
- Winning the game becomes more important than winning friends, respect, self-confidence, skill, health, and self-worth.

## ***Common Mistakes in Youth Sports***

- **Youth sports as “feeder” programs:** Only 1 in 12,000 high school athletes make the pros and only 5% who sign pro baseball contracts ever play one day in the majors. Youth sports in general should not be geared towards making pro athletes. If individuals have the talent and desire to make the pros, then specialized training and coaching can be supplemented.
- **Parents living through their kids:** When a parent lives through the success or failure of their child, it puts an enormous amount of stress on the child. The pressure on a child to excel can be extreme when parents are “winners or losers” based upon their child’s performance.
- **Lack of knowledge about sport psychology:** Most coaches are knowledgeable about teaching their sport skills but rarely have formal training in creating a healthy psychological environment for young athletes. Understanding the philosophical differences between youth and adult sports and having some basic knowledge in mental skill training interventions can have a significant positive influence on a coach’s behavior.

\*Philosophy References: Coaches who never lose, Sports and your child, Way to go, Coach!, Youth sports as a behavior setting for psychosocial interventions (Smith & Smoll, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2002).

## ***Arousal Regulation***

***Pump Up or Back Off?*** For optimal performance, athletes need to have an optimal level of arousal specific to the activity. Understanding arousal can help to optimize performance by knowing when to “raise or lower” arousal levels to match sport activity requirements

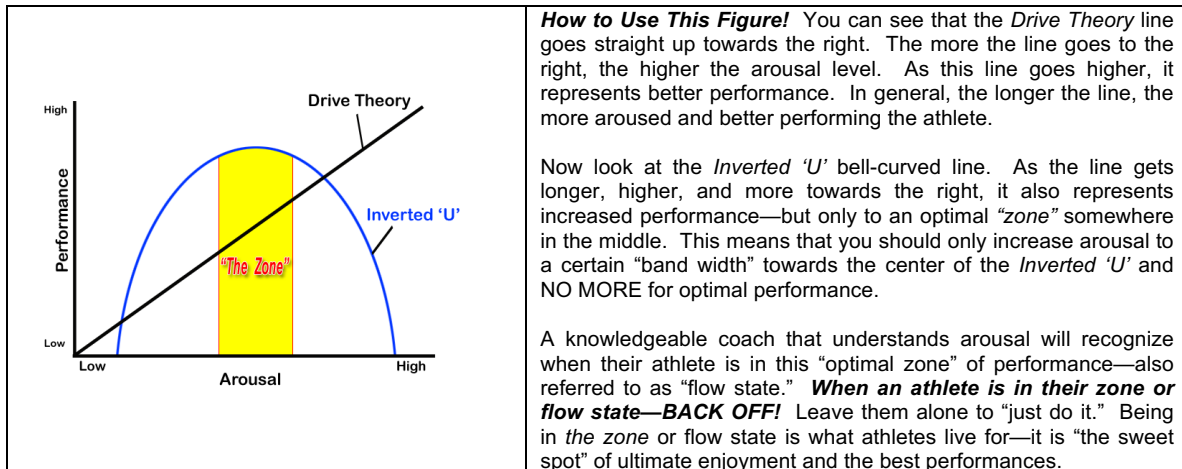
**Arousal:** A more general term than stress and anxiety. Arousal is usually thought of as a more “physiological” (body) state that can also affect the “cognitive” (mind) state. Arousal is generally defined as an, ***“energizing function of the body and mind.”***

**Arousal Theories:** Two basic arousal theories are the ***“Drive Theory”*** and the ***“Inverted ‘U’ Hypothesis.”*** Both work nicely to create awareness for the importance of optimal arousal, flow state, and ***“the zone”*** of optimal performance. ***\*Note: Optimal arousal levels are specific to the individual and the activity.*** A golfer will need a much different optimal arousal level than a football linebacker. A novice with few skills will be at a different arousal level than an experienced veteran that is highly skilled.

- **Drive Theory:** States that the more arousal, the better the performance; therefore, there is a “linear” (straight line) relationship to arousal and performance. This theory works well as a starting point but is flawed. We now know that increasing arousal levels is only good to a point—then arousal beyond this “optimal” level actually decreases performance.
- **Inverted ‘U’ Hypothesis:** States that arousal and performance are related along a curvilinear relationship (like a bell curve). As arousal increases, so does performance but only up to an optimal level. Increases of arousal beyond “optimal” do not increase performance but actually hinder or decrease performance. The goal is to stay somewhere in the middle, so you blend optimal relaxation with optimal arousal for the specific task—this produces a “flow state” which occurs in “The Zone.”

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**Enter The Zone, Flow, & Automatic Function:** The center area of the above *Inverted 'U'* is where you want athletes during competition. When an athlete is in their zone or flow state, they can also enter into “automatic functioning.” Being in automatic function is like being on autopilot. This is a state where athletes lose sense of time and a sense of ego. They flow from one movement to the next with high efficiency and concentration without concern for the crowd or other performance-robbing distractions.

### **Three Primary Influences of Arousal**

1. **Task Complexity:** *The more complex and difficult the task, the higher the arousal.*
2. **Skill Level of Athlete:** *The greater the skill level of athlete, the less arousal they will have performing the skill.*
3. **Personality of Athlete: Arousal is highly individualized.** Some athletes function better at lower or higher arousal states than others. **Think of the Inverted 'U' as NOT being a perfect bell curve.** No one's curve is exactly the same!

**How to Increase Arousal:** These are some simple ways to increase arousal for your athletes. Be careful—what increases arousal for one athlete might not work for another athlete. **\*Caution:** *Kids under stress likely need to lower arousal—not increase!*

- **Optimal arousal levels and adjusting them are highly individualized.** *You can only generally adjust arousal “for the team.” Always allow individual space for those athletes that don't fit the standard team arousal level or arousal-increasing strategy.*
- Breathing, Music and Video, Energizing Imagery, Energizing Verbal Cues, Drawing Energy from the Environment, Distraction (away from fatigue), Goal Setting, Pep Talks, and Bulletin Boards.

**How to Decrease Arousal:** (See “Relaxation” section)

\*Arousal References: Sport performance anxiety in youth athletes (Smith, Smoll, & Passer, 2002); Optimizing arousal level (Zaichkowsky & Takenaka, 1993); Arousal and performance (Zaichkowsky & Baltzell, 2001).

**BTFI:** “Beyond the F\*#! it” is not something I learned from research studies on sport psychology. I learned about BTFI while listening to a keynote presentation by Boston Philharmonic Conductor Benjamin Zander. It was a concept he realized from working with a world-class cello player who left his orchestra to audition for a more prestigious orchestra in Europe. When Zander connected with the cello player months later to learn about his former player's audition, the cello player informed him he did not get the chair position in the orchestra, and then he informed Zander he got another cello position with an even more prestigious orchestra than the one that turned him down. Puzzled, Zander inquired how he could get into a better orchestra after not being good enough for the lower orchestra...the cello player retorted, “I just said F\*#! it!” It was then Zander realized the power of truly letting go and getting beyond your own expectations—it's basically an example of the ultimate “Zone of Optimal Function” in a pure flow state. To learn more, check out, **“The Art of Possibility”** by Rosamund and Benjamin Zander where they explain BTFI in more detail along with many other aspects of optimizing your performance and enjoyment in life.

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## **Relaxation**

**“Personal best often occur when mind and muscle combine in free-flowing harmony.” Terry Orlick, Olympic Psychologist**

### **Positive Effects of Relaxation**

1. **Physiological: (Body)** Heart rate slows, breathing slows and becomes regular, oxygen consumption decreases, muscle tension decreases, endorphin levels increase (the body's natural pain killer), and a feeling of calmness emerges.
2. **Psychological: (Mind)** Shift in focus to something other than that which caused the increased tension in the first place.
  - “The shift away from self-evaluation and worry alone renders you less anxious and puts you more in control; the focus on relaxing your body, executing the next step in your game plan, or doing something joyful further reduces the tension.” (Terry Orlick)

### **Relaxation Exercises for Athletes**

1. **Simple Relaxation: (Slow Down)**
  - Take three deep breaths
  - Move in “slow motion” (talk, walk, breath, blink, think...*slowly*...)
    - These are great for “on-site” relaxation needs such as the athletic event or traveling to the event when the athlete has no privacy and might be embarrassed to stretch out for the PMR exercises below
2. **Advanced Relaxation: (Scene + Progressive Muscle Relaxation)**
  - **Scene:** Create a “Relaxation Scene” that is a safe and comforting place. Think about someplace you’ve been or create a place you’d like to visit that would be relaxing.
  - **Progressive Muscle Relaxation/PMR:** Find a comfortable place then lie on your back. Tense all the muscles in your body as tightly as you can—really tight—even your face and toes! Hold for about 30+ seconds. Gradually start releasing the tension starting at the very top of your scalp then traveling down to your toes. Keep everything else tight until you get to that body part. *Take a couple of minutes to do this drill.*

## **Goal Setting**

**“Setting the big goals is the easy part for every athlete. Setting the smaller goals that get you to the bigger goals is the hard part.”**

**--U.S. Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Mental Training Manual**

**--The Goal Continuum--**

**Process Goals>----->Performance Goals>----->Outcome Goals**

### **Types of Goals**

1. **Process Goals:** Refers to improving form, technique, and strategy. Process goals are “task oriented.” *Skill development is emphasized over winning* (or end-product outcomes).
  - There are many benefits to process goals for youth athletes. These goals improve concentration because they: are not as complicated or difficult to obtain, enhance self-efficacy (one’s perception of chance for success), and are more controllable. Because attaining process goals are *more controllable*, and they also control mental anxiety as goals are matched to current capabilities of the athlete.
2. **Performance Goals:** Refers to improving overall performance.
  - Examples: Running faster or throwing farther. *Should remain “task focused” instead of “outcome” focused towards winning.*
3. **Outcome Goals:** The “end product” that is usually “winning.”
  - Popular sport culture places higher value on outcome goals i.e. trophies, medals, fame, money, etc. However, elite athletes have been shown to become more sophisticated with using process and performance goals to achieve outcome or “product-oriented” ends.
  - Outcome goals can be used carefully in practice for “motivation.” For competition, it is best to focus on process and performance goals.

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- Outcome goals can be more effective in helping experienced athletes maintain focus and effort once they have mastered skills and they are able to perform these skills with “*automatic function*” while in “*the zone*” or flow state.
- **\*Caution:** Focusing on outcome goals can be hazardous for many athletes! Doing each skill well (the process) will then optimize the “performance” of the individual skills and movements.

## **Goal Basics (Smith & Smoll)**

1. Set specific goals in terms that can be measured.
2. Set difficult but realistic goals.
3. Set short-term as well as long-range goals.
4. Set process/performance goals over to outcome goals.
5. Express goals in positive rather than negative terms.
6. Set goals for both practices and competition.

## **Setting Multiple-Goal Levels of Difficulty (Orlick)**

- For best results, set three different levels of goal difficulty as outlined by Olympic psychologist Terry Orlick:
1. **Dream Goal: (HARD)** High difficulty and reflects a level of performance that is achievable only if athletes perform at top of their game i.e. experience flow and auto function in “*the zone*.”
  2. **Realistic Goal: (MODERATE)** Moderate difficulty that is lower than dream goals but higher than self-acceptance goals. Reflects an accurate appraisal of a number of factors, such as current performance capabilities, situational factors, and quality of mental preparation, and would be the performance standard that could be *realistically expected with a good, but not great, performance*.
  3. **Self-Acceptance Goal: (EASY)** Defines the lowest level of performance that athletes can attain and still feel somewhat successful. Designed to help athletes deal with those situations when they perform poorly; helps them to take away positive things from a below-average performance.

\*Goal References: Goal setting in sport (Burton, Naylor, & Holliday, 2001); Embracing your potential (Orlick, 1998); Way to go coach! (Smith & Smoll, 2002).

## **Mental Imagery**

“I see and feel myself throwing exactly the pitches that I want to throw before I ever begin to warm up at the ballpark.”  
--Nolan Ryan, Baseball Pitching Legend

**More than just visual pictures—“feel it” with all your senses!**

**Visualization vs. Mental Imagery:** Visualization is commonly thought to be the same as mental imagery; however, visualization is simply defined as the mental pictures or images that are constructed in the athlete’s mind (Martens). While a part of mental imagery involves visualization, mental imagery itself goes beyond the mere visual pictures to include all the athlete’s senses such as hearing, touch, taste, and smell.

- *The notion is that the “more real” the image, the more transfer from mind to actual body movements. Therefore, true mental imagery is multi-sensory (also called multi-modal).*

The ability to understand and use mental imagery is extremely important for using many other mental skill interventions.

**Progressions:** The whole idea with “mental skills training” including imagery is to use it when the pressure is on during competition. To work up to using mental skills during competition, one must progress the training systematically just as with physical training

1. **Neutral Zone:** It is best to start initial mental imagery practice somewhere quiet and private with no distractions.
2. **Regular Training:** Try imagery a little bit at a time during routine “low-stress” practice sessions.

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3. **Simulated Competition Training:** One step closer to the real world.
4. **Competition:** The moment of truth!

“To have been there before without ever having been there—that is the goal of simulation.” *Terry Orlick, Olympic Psychologist*

**Coaching Tips on Mental Skills Progressions:** Eventually you want your athletes to be calm under fire—but you can’t expect them to master mental skills during high-stress pressure immediately. Allow them to feel successful without stress and distractions. As they improve, systematically start adding more and more pressure through “*simulated competition*.”

**Practice—How Often & How Much?** It is best to practice mental skills including imagery daily. For younger children and imagery, up to five minutes per day would be fine. Teens might be able to handle 5-10 successfully while adult athletes are recommended to practice mental imagery about 10-15 minutes per day. Most Olympic and world champions do at least 15 minutes per day and even more before major competitions. **Daily practice is highly recommended.**

\*Mental Imagery References: USOC Sport psychology training manual (Bauman, Haberl, McCann, & Peterson, 2002); Coaches guide to sport psychology (Martens, 1987); Imagery interventions in sport (Murphy, 1994); Enhancing children’s sport & life experiences, In pursuit of excellence (Orlick, 2001); Way to go Coach! (Smith & Smoll, 2002).

## **Attention Focus**

“Where your focus goes, everything else follows.” *Terry Orlick, Olympic Psychologist*

Many sport psychology experts cite attention focus as *one of the most* important mental skills while some, like Olympic psychologist and author Terry Orlick, feel that attention focus is “the most” important mental skill. Orlick cites, “*Focusing is the most important mental skill associated with ongoing learning and consistent high-level performance.*”

**Definition:** “Attention implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others.” **When an athlete is focused, they block out what is not important so they can attend to what is important.**

**Attention & Arousal:** Attention focus has a great deal to do with arousal. Being in the *optimal zone* of arousal (or flow state) is also an area where an athlete has the most controlled attention focus.

- **Highly focused attention in “the zone” should NOT be disturbed by coaches and parents!**

**Focus & Automatic Function:** Focus is sometimes called “non-focus” because of automatic function. The more skilled the athlete, and the more the athlete functions in the *optimal zone of arousal and performance* (center bandwidth of *Inverted ‘U’*), the more an athlete enters automatic functioning.

**Selective Attention & Filtering:** Selective attention refers to selecting certain information for processing while filtering out or ignoring non-relevant information. For example, **what does the athlete need to pay attention to as they perform?**

- **The cheetah is an example of “relaxed intensity”** as it runs at over 60 mph with perfect fluid relaxed strides...what beauty! This relaxed intensity is what athletes also aim for.
- **Attentional Width vs. Task:** Think of attention as a band width. Sometimes an athlete needs to attend to a *broad width*, but other situations call for a very *narrow width* of attention. Broad attention allows a person to see several things at once. Narrow attention limits a person to only one or two cues. Athletes should know how to use both broad and narrow.
- \*Attention References: Attention (Abernethy, 2001); USOC Sport psychology mental training manual (Bauman, Haberl, McCann, & Peterson, 2002); Attention in sport (Cox, 1998); In pursuit of excellence (Orlick, 2001); Concentration (Weinberg & Gould, 1999).

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## ***Sports Psychology Reading Recommendations***

***“In Pursuit of Excellence: How to Win in Sport and Life Through Mental Training”*** (242 pages)

- (Terry Orlick, 2001) ISBN #0736031863
- *Terry Orlick, PhD, is a world famous Olympic psychologist, author, lecturer, and professor from Canada. Orlick has over 28 years of Olympic experience and is the “king of focus and flow.” His books are well written and emphasize the “joy of movement” that can be experienced in successful sport and exercise activities.*

***“Body-Mind Mastery: Creating Success in Sport and Life”*** (166 pages)

- (Dan Millman, 1999) ISBN #1577310942
- *Former world champion athlete Dan Millman does a great job getting you to think about moving “naturally” as an athlete and in life. Joy of life and movement are emphasized along with some Eastern Zen philosophy.*

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