

Improve Your Mental Game

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In the February - March 2006 issue of the Asian Bowling Digest, I provided readers advice on how to use a pre-shot routine and visualization process to improve consistency and reduce choking.

State of Our Sport, Asian Bowling Digest, February - March 2006, Joe Slowinski

A few weeks ago, on November 27, I watched the talented PBA player Joe Ciccone melt under the pressure of nearly achieving his first professional title as he handed Jason Couch the Chicago Classic title. As Couch stated, about the situation, "you don't get that chance out here ever, so you have to take advantage." Ciccone simply choked and watched in fright as a certain victory slipped away due to a substantive mental lapse. He went from dominating the match, throwing 5 out of 6 strikes in the front six frames of the game, to giving the title away with unforced errors and splits.

All viewers who watched this match witnessed an event that is familiar in sport. Year after year, we see a small percentage of elite athletes fall pray to a faulty situational mental game. Many recall the monumental collapse of golfer Greg Norman in the 1996 Masters. Norman went from certain victory with a 6 stroke lead at 54 holes to handing the title to Nick Faldo and losing by 5 strokes.

It is likely that Ciccone had faltered by focusing too much thought on his physical execution rather than employing mind tools and emphasizing his mental game. After seeing this unfortunate crash, I asked myself if he had formally practiced visualizing himself in this position. Once Couch sniffed an open opportunity, he stepped-up and closed the door with three Xs in the tenth. Ciccone, with his head in his hands, could only ask why and reflect on what could have been.

Which side of the fence do you find yourself? Have you found yourself in a position where you have not taken advantage of the situation and fell short in a tournament? From my experience, as a Silver-Level coach, most bowlers I work with have not tapped into mental tools to improve the mind's side of the sport. This includes elite bowlers with great potential. In the initial analysis, with all bowlers, I also conduct a mental needs assessment in addition to a physical game analysis. Until a bowler dedicates himself to the mental game, he will not be able to reach his potential in the sport.

Bowlers who want their game to evolve to the next level must focus on improving their mental game and establishing visualization routines and training with the mental potential of their minds. This includes bowlers who want to simply improve their average or those who want to compete successfully at the international level. Specifically, some researchers believe that the overall performance potential of an athlete is at most 25 percent physical and at least 75 percent mental. Let's explore some of the research, the implication of these findings and some simple ways to help you improve your mental game in order to realize your full potential.

In 2001, Golf Digest sponsored a science in golf contest. In the winning entry, Arizona State University professor Dr. Debbie Crews demonstrated the impact of stress on putting performance. High-level amateur golfers were asked to first attempt 10 putts on a flat green. To induce stress, Dr. Crews introduced a financial reward or punishment in round two of the research project. If the golfers could perform better, sinking more putts, than their original ten putts, they would earn \$US 300. They were also told that those who did worse than their original putting performance, they would be required to pay the golf doctor \$US 100. This stressor impacted the golfers, both positively and negatively. All golfers experienced stress but some were able to perform better than the others. In other words, they were able to not be impacted negatively by the stress. Through EEG images, she illustrated that golfers who putted successfully under stress had more equally distributed brain activity on both hemispheres while those who choked had activity only on the left side or the more logical hemisphere. Those golfers who could draw on their more creative intuitive brain were more successful while those who thought about their mechanics failed (paralysis by analysis). Clearly, the successful golfers were able to tap into a creative visualization process.

Other research has illustrated the importance of utilizing of visualization. In a well cited study, Alan Richardson's research on the impact of visualization in free throw shooting revealed that daily visualization led to nearly an equivalent improvement in one month as compared to those who actually practiced free throws at the gym daily. Richardson tested three groups who all shot free throws to establish a baseline. One group did nothing for the next 30 days while one group shot free throws on a daily basis. The third group visualized successful free throw shooting on a daily basis. When the groups were tested at the end of the month, the group that had practiced free throws daily had improved by 24 percent while the group that merely visualized quality free throws improved 23 percent.

In addition to Crews' and Richardson's findings, recent research on brain chemistry and elite sport

performance has shown promise in understanding the impact of the mental game and performance. Specifically, researchers found that elite marksmen released alpha waves just prior to their archery shots. Alpha waves are related to creativity as well as the waves released when we are at a restful state. And, most interestingly, these alpha waves are released in the left side of the brain, balancing the distribution of brain activity. Specifically, the release was in the left temporal and parietal lobes.

In addition, research in pre-shot routine consistency has illustrated the impact on performance.

In the December 2004 Journal of Sport Behavior, Czech and colleagues examined the impact on performance of a pre-shot routine in basketball. Although the players who used a set routine prior to every shot outperformed non-routine players, the players who utilized a pre-shot routine improved significantly more as compared with those who didn't on the second free throw. A pre-shot routine had a clear impact on improving performance. Each of these research overviews illustrates the importance of tapping into your mind to enhance your performance. Accordingly, here are my recommendations for readers to help take a step toward achieving a more consistent and higher level of overall performance.

Recommendations to Improve Your Game

1. Prior to your shot, be sure to do the same pre-shot routine, exactly each time, prior to every shot. Pat your hand with rosin, grab a puff ball, wipe the oil from the ball, dry your hand with the air drier, etc. In addition, in this phase, think about the exact technical mechanics you will use such as foot placement, hand position, target, etc. After you recall these technical requirements, using the left hemisphere, go to the approach.
2. As you transition, from the pre-shot to the approach, recall a favorite song, close your eyes and inhale deeply. These steps will help your mind release alpha waves and prepare the subconscious for a quality execution.
3. As you set your feet, on the approach, visualize a successful shot in your mind. Take another breathe, exhale and go.
4. In addition, at home, visualize yourself bowling successfully for 10 – 20 minutes daily. To begin, close your eyes and think about the specific bowling center. During this visualization, try to draw on all of your senses. Hear the sounds and imagine the smells and visual scenes that would be present in achieving your goal, from bowling your first 200 to winning the AMF World Cup. What does this process look like? What does it feel like? Sound like? Smell like? Think about achieving your goals. Imagine the crowd. The more integrated all of your senses are in visualization, the more effective it will be when you actually are in the situation. The next time you visit a bowling center be sure to collect concrete sensory data for use in your visualization exercises. Commit to at least one month of visual exercise to reap a benefit. And, don't be skeptical. Without a strong commitment, you will be wasting your time. But, for those who are willing to commit, you will see a future improvement in your game.