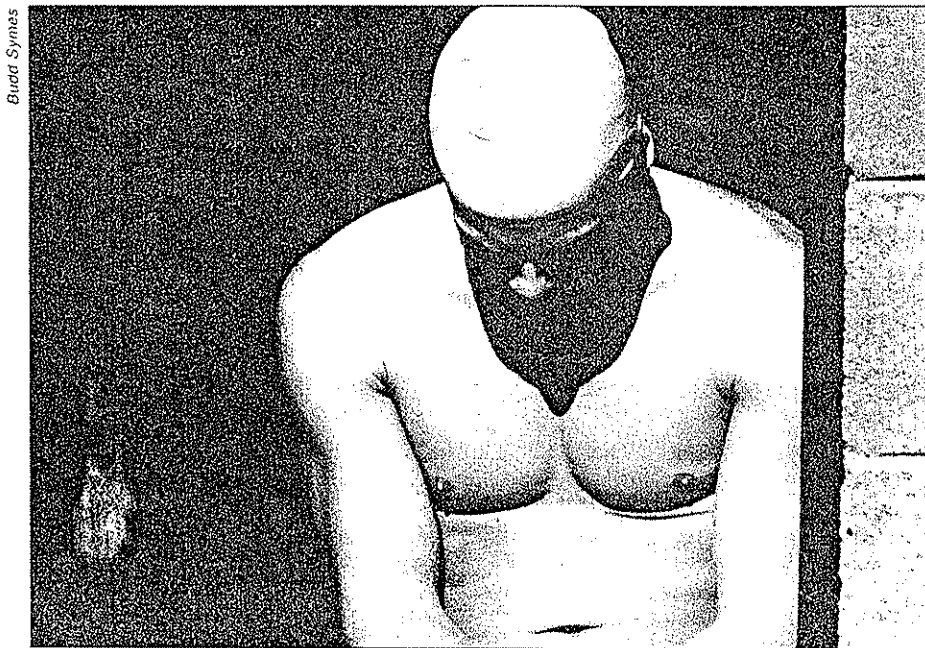


Think Your Way to Victory

by JoAnn Dahlkoetter

Using Mental Imagery



Creative visualization can be a valuable addition to every training program.

WHETHER YOU'RE PREPARING for the Ironman or still contemplating doing your first triathlon, there's an aspect of your training that you're probably neglecting. If you read the sports literature, you'll learn everything from swimming stretches to running fartlek intervals—the physical elements of conditioning. However, you probably have not put an adequate amount of time into the mental aspects. Let's say your next race is four days away. No amount of physical training between now and the race will take more than 15 seconds off your time. But the techniques which I will discuss have the

JoAnn Dahlkoetter, Ph.D., is a sports psychologist in San Francisco. She was the woman's winner of the 1980 San Francisco Marathon, and placed second in the 1982 Hawaii Ironman.

potential of taking several minutes off your time. If you take note of these ideas on how to tune up your psychological approach to competition, you may just surprise yourself at your next race.

Many people have obligations which restrict the amount of time that they can devote to exercise. There is no substitute, of course, for putting in an adequate amount of mileage; but without the proper mental framework, lack of concentration, mental distractions and stress may lower the quality of your workouts. Spending a few minutes each evening evaluating the day's workout, dealing with training problems, and preparing for the next day can actually enhance the training time that you do spend. I'd like to share one simple technique, one that can enhance your mental awareness and balance the body-mind relationship: using creative visualization.

Creative visualization is the process of using your imagination to create whatever you want in your life. You generate a clear idea or mental picture of something you wish to realize. Then you focus on that idea regularly, combining the imagery with your daily training, until the goal becomes a reality. The more energy you put into imagining what you want, the more it begins to manifest itself in your life.

Visualization techniques have the potential for taking several minutes off your time.

I used a visualization program to prepare for the Hawaii Ironman in 1982. During the event itself, the mental training really paid off. When I got off of my bike (after 112 miles) I had an aching back, tight thighs and a stomach ache; and I was looking at a 26-mile run. It was a real low point in the race. But I pictured myself during a previous peak performance winning the San Francisco marathon in 1980. I ran again (in my imagination) through the cool fog; my stride was strong, my breathing smooth and my whole body felt light. When my awareness returned to the Ironman, I found myself running more easily, moving up from 10th to second place before the finish.

You can do all the physical preparation in the world, but on race day, success depends on a balance of relaxation, determination and your ability to concentrate on the mental picture. Here's a simple way to begin using mental imagery to improve your performance and enjoyment of the sport. Try this mental exercise for 15 minutes a day.

Find a comfortable place to be alone with your inner self, away from external distractions (perhaps at bedtime or listening to your favorite music).

Relax

The subconscious mind is far more receptive to new ideas when you are relaxed. Close your eyes and take about 10 slow, deep breaths from your abdomen. Begin to clear your mind of extraneous thoughts.

Creating an Image

Imagine that you are sitting in a special chair with a master panel which controls an image on a large screen in front of you. Now think back to a time when you felt your best while doing something. This could be a peak performance at a triathlon, or doing an exciting training run. Recreate the experience on the screen as though it were happening right at this moment. Try to incorporate into the image as many of your five senses as you can.

Correcting Errors

Now let's go back and repeat the experience again with one alteration. Instead of being a passive viewer, you now have the opportunity to actually change your perspective on what happened in the past—you can change anything you didn't like. Forget how tired you may have been or what mistakes you made. Now, return to your earlier image, replay and edit the film several times, first in slow motion, and then at the correct speed, until you arrive at exactly the picture you desire. Your memory is not only of a peak performance, but of a perfect performance.

Now we'll apply this imagery to your training. Just as we warm up the body through stretches, it's equally important to warm up the mind before a workout. First, set a specific goal for the workout, one that is challenging, but attainable. Take five minutes to recreate the image you generated in the steps above. Then begin training: See if you can gradually translate this picture into your body. For example, when you can picture a deer running, you'll lengthen your stride and feel lighter. Remember, you've already trained those motor-neurons through mental imagery. All you have to do now is allow your body to respond the way it's been trained.

Once you begin to use mental programming on a regular basis, you'll find that it becomes an integral part of your thinking. You'll have more body/mind control, and the goals you mentally programmed will just seem to happen. Sure, you have to also do some new training to see improvement, but the results will come more naturally, with less effort. You'll notice your confidence growing, your concentration improving, and your training and racing will be more fun. △

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Seeing is **BELIEVING**

Use Your Imagination

Here's how you can properly develop and use your imagination to achieve and accomplish your goals:

- *Get the picture.*

Establish what you want with clear and simple pictures in your mind. Always enlarge and exaggerate the winning pictures. Pretend to be watching yourself on TV and play back your winning in slow motion. And be sure to make it "short and sweet" (i.e., look at the last 10 meters of your race, then look at your turn a few times). Remember, the "how to's" are not clear until we get the "what to do's" in our mind.

- *Act out the picture.*

As often as you can, take clear and regular actions toward what you want. That means do what the picture is requiring you to do. Spend your practices doing the stuff that supports the picture in your mind. You'll quickly find the more you do this, the more real the picture becomes to you. Actions feed the imagination. So, act out the picture!

- *Play the picture, act out the picture and refine the picture.*

Play the picture, act out the picture and refine the picture. Play the picture, act out the picture and refine the picture. Play the picture, act out the picture and refine the picture...Got the picture?

Imagine that you are running full speed into a room that was completely dark. But right in your path is a huge, thick, brick wall. If you keep running full speed, what do you think will happen?

You would run right into it. Right?

Running smack into that brick wall could do some serious damage. It would hurt! Why, then, would you run into it?

Most likely, you are unaware that the brick wall is there. In reality, the brick wall exists, *but in your mind*, it is not there. The reality of the wall has not yet been made real to you.

Even though the brick wall is, indeed, real, you cannot respond to it or make a decision concerning it or react to its presence because it does not yet exist to you.

You might be asking, "Why is all this important? What does any of this have to do with my imagination?"

Before I answer that question, let me ask you this: do

you ever stop to wonder why we've been given our eyes, our ears, our senses of touch and smell? The obvious answer is, of course, to see, to hear, to feel, to smell, etc. But why do they exist and play such primary roles in how we live and interact in this world?

The word "sense" is defined by the New World Webster's dictionary as, "...the physical ability which allows a person to become aware of the things around him." From this definition, we gather that it is the job of our senses to create the awareness of things around us. But again...why?

Our senses pick up the reality of things around us so that the things around us can be made real to us. It is, then, the job of our imagination to take what the senses give it and bring to life the things around us. Our imagination is the difference between a friend telling you how great the Boys II Men concert is and actually being at the concert front row center.

So, to answer your question, it is important to understand that our senses provide the segmented pieces that our imagination eventually presents to us as real.

The great thing about our imagination is that it not only represents the reality of the things around us, but it also makes real anything that is brought in front of the mind's eye so that we can act on it.

Are you beginning to see how important our imagination is?

Seeing is believing!

Avoid the Weeds of Life

Imagine, now, an open field with rich, moist, dark soil. Feel the coolness of it between your toes as you walk across it.

If you left that rich soil alone and came back to it a year later, what do you suppose might happen to it? Well, for one thing, weeds could very well have taken residence. Chances are garbage and junk might have been thrown onto it. It might even be dry with cracks all over it. Right?

Well, that rich soil represents our mind, our imagination. If we choose not to tend to it or use it, the "weeds of life" will take up residence. And isn't that what happens to most people? That is why it is so hard, sometimes, to believe in our own ability and success. Weeds of doubt and fear try to choke those positive thoughts

right out of us. And if all we see are weeds, then all we can believe is doubt and fear.

Clearly, *seeing is definitely believing!*

Putting It All Together

Now, how does knowing all of this stuff help me achieve my goals? Can using my imagination help me reach my dreams? The answer is a resounding "yes!"

And to prove it, close your eyes. When I say "table," put "table" in your mind. What do you see? Do you see the letters t-a-b-l-e? Or do you see a picture or a representation of a table? Remember, the role of our imagination is to make something real to us so that we can act on it!

And as we saw with the "dark room" example, it is only when something is made real to us or brought to our awareness that we are able to respond to it—react to its presence. It is much easier to catch a ball when you see it. Almost anyone can sit down in a chair when they know it's right there. Right?

Think of our imagination as a gift or a tool to plant, cultivate and grow rich and healthy things in our life. That means we have to use our imagination to entertain what it is like to beat someone to the wall or come from behind to win. The cool thing about our imagination is that it goes where we go...all the time. If we choose, we

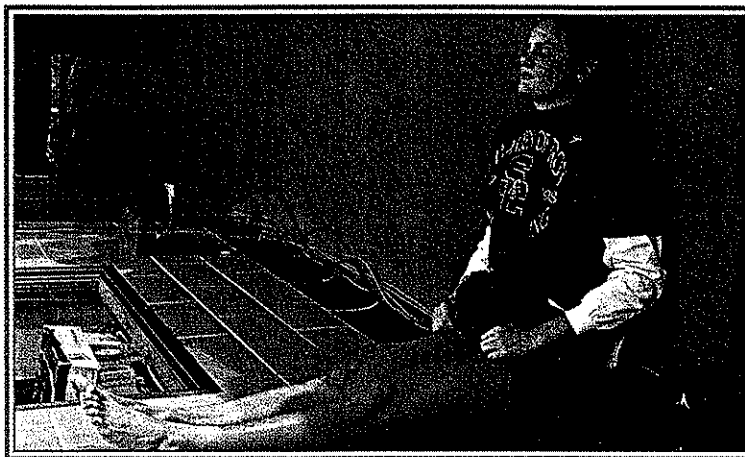


Photo by Peter H. Bick

can use it to practice winning. The more times we see it, the more times we will believe it.

We all have been blessed with an imagination to help us achieve whatever is in our hearts. Our imagination processes information and makes it real to us so that we can act on it accordingly.

Everyone has an imagination. And we only have to use it if we want it to work...because *seeing is definitely believing!* ■

About the Author

Byron Davis, the former American record holder for the 50 meter butterfly, is a Masters swimmer and motivational speaker based in Los Angeles.

We all have been blessed with an imagination to help us achieve whatever is in our hearts.

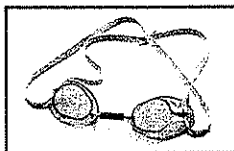


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Mind Movies

When Jonty Skinner swam to a world record of 49.44 in the 100-meter freestyle at the 1976 U.S. Nationals, he had the eerie feeling that he was watching himself perform. "It seemed like I was floating through the race, almost like an out-of-body experience," recalls Skinner, now a coach at the U.S. Olympic

Training Center. "I never felt fatigue, I never felt pain."

The race was so easy for Skinner because he'd already seen it happen—in his own mind. "It was what people call a 'visualization race,'" explains Skinner. "It's something you've done 100 times. You're just acting it out physically for the first time. That's how I felt."

When you've visualized winning the race in your head, swimming it for real is just like déjà vu all over again By John Hanc

Visualization—a form of mental training that involves "pre-creating" an upcoming event in your mind in great detail and then rehearsing it again and again—has long been part of the training regimens of college and elite swimmers. But what about fitness and Masters swimmers? Can this exercise in self-imagery help them train and race better? "Absolutely," says sports psychologist Steven Ungerleider, Ph.D., author of *Mental Training for Peak Performance* (Rodale Books, 1996). "It can help your performance, your energy level, and your enjoyment of the sport."

The only obstacles, Ungerleider says, are doubt and fear. Lots of athletes are skeptical, even afraid, of the value of such mental training. "It sounds like hocus-pocus to them," he says. It may sound like hocus-pocus, but it isn't. Research—as well as anecdotal experiences of swimmers like Skinner—has proved that visualization works. And while it may take some time to master the technique, it's something most of us can learn to do because most of us are doing it already, whether we know it or not.

"Thoughts are always accompanied by images," says sports psychologist Alan Goldberg, Ed.D., of Competitive Advantage in Amherst, Massachusetts. "So in a sense, we're visualizing all the time. The trick for improved performance is to make it more formal, not just daydreaming. You don't have to be a world-class athlete to do that."

But you do need to follow a few basic steps that are key to harnessing the power of vi-

sualization and using it to improve your training and race performances. Here's what many sports psychologists, coaches, and swimmers recommend.

Write your script

Visualization has been described as "running a movie in your mind's eye." Every good flick starts with a good story. In this case, a good story equals a goal. What's your goal as a swimmer? Once you've established it, write it down. "Be as detailed as possible," suggests Byron Davis, assistant swim coach at the University of California-Los Angeles. "Use as many senses as you can—the sounds, the smells, even the sting of chlorine in your eyes."

"It's sort of like you're the director and the star, and you have to decide how you want the story to come out," explains Goldberg, who also recommends dictating your script into a tape recorder after you've written it down.

Breathe deeply and relax

Find a quiet place, lie back, and take a deep breath. "I think breathing is the most important component of getting prepared to do any sort of mental practice," says Ungerleider. As you breathe deeply and fully, start relaxing your body progressively—tightening and loosening every part of your body, starting from your toes. This is important. "If you're anxious, imagery won't work," says Goldberg. "The more relaxed you are, the more detailed your images will be, and the more effective visualization will become."

Play your movie

Once you're relaxed, run through your script in your mind. If you taped your script, press "play" on your cassette. Now, try to see your script come to life in your mind's eye. Include all the details and sensory descriptions. "Let's say you're a breaststroker and you're just cruising down the lane," says Ungerleider. "Try to see yourself in the pool, see that you've got your stroke underway, and you're in your rhythm. Feel the energy in your back and chest. Watch yourself do this in your mind."

Depending on your race, you may not want to visualize the whole thing. Skinner visualized all 49 seconds of his record-breaking race, but if you're training for a longer event—say, a 2.4-mile swim as part of an Ironman triathlon—you may want to visualize just the key points in the race: start, middle, transition, finish.

Edit your story

You want a happy ending? You need a positive visualization. For years, Davis would see himself breaking down. "I couldn't visualize myself richly enough to beat me," he says. "I was always false-starting in my mind, or somebody would touch me out." Finally, he decided to change his image. "I would let the scenario run freely," he says. "Then I would visualize it running out, like the end of a tape. And I'd visualize myself taking it off a reel and throwing it in the trash. Then I'd start with a new, positive mental image." Davis' new mental movie was a blockbuster—it helped him qualify for the 1996 Olympic trials.

Practice patience

Doing what Davis did takes time and practice. "Imagery is a skill," says Goldberg. "People may not be able to get that detailed at first. But the more you practice, the easier it gets."

At first, Goldberg says, try visualization sessions of five to 10 minutes. If your goal is a race, don't wait until the night before the race. Start practicing long before the big day. Then maybe you, too, can sit back and watch your epic unfold. "Visualization can be a powerful tool," says Goldberg. "It builds confidence, fosters belief in yourself, and creates a positive expectation." ☉

Michael Johnson