BY: DARRELL SIFFORD

CONCENTRATE ON SUCCEEDING

It's all in the mind

How do you prepare yourself for a big event in your life - whether it's making a presentation to your board of directors, asking your boss for a raise or playing for the C-flight championship at your golf club?

What can you do to increase the chances that you'll perform up to your potential, that you won't mess things up because you're overanxious or so fearful that your mouth dries and your throat cracks?

These are questions that I took into an interview with a New York psychiatrist, Dr. Ari Kiev, who worked with American athletes at the Pan American Games last summer and who, as a member of the US Olympic Sports Medicine Committee, will work with athletes at the 1980 Olympics at Moscow and Lake Placid, NY.

In a nutshell, here's what he said:

There are three words that hold the key to successful preparation for any event: concentration, concentration and concentration.

Do you get the idea that this is where Dr. Kiev thinks the game of life is played - inside your head? Well, that's exactly what he thinks. Success, he said, belongs to those who concentrate on succeeding.

When you're dealing with any high-pressure, highly evaluated performance, you can use mental imagery techniques to prepare yourself. Dr. Kiev said, "You get into a relaxed state, and then you visualize the event."

There are two parts to the exercise:

You visualize some of the things that make you anxious, things that you might anticipate - such as the audience's laughter at the wrong time during your speech, or your yanking a short putt off line. "In a relaxed state you're more comfortable thinking through the events until they are not so terrifying," Dr. Kiev said.

You then 'plan and visualize all elements of the activity' - not just those that plague you - and you picture yourself coping successfully with every obstacle.

If you're somebody who tends to panic - really panic - in stressful situations, then you need to go a step beyond these exercises, Dr. Kiev said. You need to find out why you panic and learn how to deal with panic.

First, let's examine how to deal with panic. You can control some of your physiological responses - shortness of breath, wildly pumping heart- by learning to breathe correctly, slow your pulse and changing the carbon dioxide mixture in your blood, Dr. Kiev said. 'If you don't know how to deal with your stress responses, then stress creates more stress.' In effect, he said, you really have nothing to fear but fear, and if you harness your fear, then it will dissolve.

Next, let's look at why we panic.

Often, Dr. Kiev said, our panic is caused by our feeling that we have to meet the expectations of other people, that we might be ridiculed if we do something wrong, that people might think less of us if we don't come through with flying colors. Sometimes merely "identifying and acknowledging this feeling may be enough to help overcome it," he said.

When we feel good about ourselves, when we're confident and psyched up, we "can go beyond conventional limitations," Dr. Kiev said. "If we're depressed or overly anxious, it's hard to do that."

How can we get ourselves psyched up?

Again, the key is concentration, focusing on the task at hand, said Dr. Kiev, who played varsity basketball at Harvard, where he was a contemporary of Ted Kennedy. In sports, he said, "this is best done by a coach who knows the game, who can get players to concentrate on the critical elements of technique. I was with Bobby Knight (the US Pan Am team basketball coach) for all the games in Puerto Rico. Against Cuba the crowds were wild. Against Puerto Rico it was bedlam. Knight's position was: "Spectators can't score points."

"Our team was playing in a foreign, strange gymnasium. That can be upsetting to some teams. Knight's position was: "As long as the basket is 10 feet high, it's OK. That's what we train for."

"If we can remember that - concentrate on what we train for and not be distracted - then we can do our best," said Dr. Kiev.

He admitted, though, that it takes a lot of practice to get that level of concentration.

How can we get it? How can we become like Ted Williams, whose concentration was so great that, at bat, he could see the stitches on the baseball as it flamed out from the pitcher's hand?

We may never be as good as Ted Williams and other superstars, Dr. Kiev said, because "there maybe something inherent in them."

But each of us, he said, has the talent to improve our concentration. How? Well, here's one exercise that Dr. Kiev recommends:

Relax, sit, close your eyes and see how long you can keep your mind focused on the subject of your choice. Keep a stopwatch in your hand and time yourself. You'll be surprised how, with practice, you can increase your span of concentration.

"The human mind is like a switch, to some extent," Dr. Kiev said. "We tend not to recognize that we have some control over our mental mechanism. To the extent that we can increase the amount of time spent focusing on something, the more able we are to tune out distracting thoughts" that interfere with our performance.

GRID CONCENTRATION EXERCISE

Directions:
Beginning with 00, put a slash through each number in the proper sequence.

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48	82	89	47	35	17	10	42	62	34
44	67	93	11	07	43	72	94	69	56
53	79	05	22	54	74	58	14	91	02
06	68	99	75	26	15	41	66	20	40
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Comments:

Figure 19-1 **Sample grid exercise form for training and assessing the ability to concentrate**

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BY James Loehr, Ed.D.

Mental Toughness Training

Achieving Athletic Excellence - The last Frontier Of Sport

FOREWORD - Arthur Ashe

During my 1975 Wimbledon Finals match with Jimmy Connors, I was occasionally seen with my eyes closed when resting between games. This prompted the post-match inquiry, "Were you meditating?" My answer was always "yes and no." "Yes" in the sense that it was a formalized technique of mental and physical relaxation. "No" in that I was not reciting any special words or mantras to myself for ninety seconds. I had simply come to believe at age 33 that I performed better when I was physically conditioned, had a firm game plan in mind, **was totally focused on the encounter itself, and remained in control of my actions.**

This notion of self-control became an integral part of my tennis training at the very beginning - but for an unusual reason. As part of the first group of black youngsters in the south to aspire to tennis greatness, I was warned that my future participation depended largely on my ability to exercise an extraordinary degree of self-control. Some tournament directors in the 1950's, it was thought, would use any excuse to deny me entry. My decorum, therefore, had to be beyond reproach.

My tennis mentor, Dr. R. Walter Johnson, thus had a sign posted on the wall for all to see: **THOSE WHOM THE GODS WISH TO DESTROY THEY FIRST MAKE MAD.** I looked at that sign for eight summers. If at first I followed its dictates because I was told to do so, I soon became a true believer, for dozens of parents of my junior opponents approached Dr. Johnson and marvelled at his students' **self-control.**

I began to see for myself what my nonplussed game face did to my opponents when matters became tense. I displayed little or no emotion, no matter what the score. **The other guy was frequently throwing his racket, cursing, and unraveling. Not only did it continue to rattle the opposition, it enabled me to minimize the time lost trying to contain nonproductive frustration.**

I began to see a heightened interest in this mental side of sports in the early sixties. Television close-ups brought the strain of world class competition into our living rooms, and the fan saw a very wide range of human emotions. Doug Sanders missed an eight-inch putt that cost him the British Open. Weight lifters went through psyching rituals that were associated with mental patients. Tommy Bolt threw his golf clubs. Muhammad Ali's pre-fight weigh-ins became case studies for psychiatry students. But one man became a cult figure and the paragon of what the mind can do to enhance athletic performance: Bruce Lee.

The Chinese-born Lee fascinated westerners with his martial arts prowess. His movie, *Enter the Dragon*, captivated audiences and, despite Hollywood special effects, graphically **showed the power of the totally focused mind.** Professional athletes such as Kareem Abdul Jabbar became disciples. By the late sixties owners of professional teams hired consultants to help their players through slumps and to improve performance. In the early seventies, amateur and professional athletes began enrolling in courses designed to improve concentration. Transcendental Meditation, or TM, and est sessions became very popular.

The place of mental discipline in sports has continued to evolve, and now in the nineties, we have a manual that details the 'whys and hows' of putting the full powers of the mind to work in athletic competition. Jim Loehr has, in essence, crystallized in plain English the recent contributions of Eastern influences on standard Western practices. **Though his emphasis pertains to athletics, it becomes clear to the reader that his advice has relevance to ordinary life as well.**

Training it / Confide / The 814

A Personal Journey:

The journey into mental toughness, a seemingly subtle and intangible journey, is captured in the following passage:

The game is about to begin. In less than an hour, I'm going to be put to the test. All of my training, hard work, and effort are suddenly past. There is only now.

Somehow, though, things are different this time. The new learnings and understanding have changed me. I'm still a little shaky inside, my palms are wet, and I am a little nervous. That's the same, but there are differences. I'm looking forward to performing in a way I never have before. I feel like a kid again–I'm excited. I feel lucky to have the chance to do what I'm about to do. I've never felt that way. In the past I've always felt a crazy combination of obligation, expectation, commitment, and fear.

Oh, I can't say it was never fun or that I never looked forward to it. But it wasn't the same as now. Before I was too busy trying to perform well to enjoy myself. I was too busy trying not to look stupid or trying to break some new record. If I broke the record, I was extremely happy. If I looked and performed lousy, I was miserable. During the performance, I always got caught up in which it would be– a new record or another catastrophe. I hated losing. That hasn't changed, but the focus has.

I'm not playing 'not to lose' anymore. I still want to perform to my best, to break that new record, to walk away victorious, but something important has changed. My focus now is the MOMENT. After much convincing and experimentation, I finally put into practice something that has transformed me into a performer. The outcome is as much a surprise to me as it is to

everyone else–I can perform! And the changes in myself that are responsible for the transformation seem subtle and insignificant; the changes are almost too simple to put into words.

I have learned to focus on the MOMENT.
I *savor* the moment.
Every moment of every performance is something to be fully experienced and enjoyed.
I take each moment for what it is, and whenever I do that, I immediately experience a sense of calm, strength, and energy. I seem to glow inside.

When I savor the moment, a new and powerful source of energy gets released within me. I immediately feel more positive and more in control. Things start flowing automatically. There's no tension, no anxiety, no fear. As soon as I lose this moment, however, as soon as I start thinking about winning and losing, what I should have done or what could happen, all the negatives come charging back.

I had been told and had read many times that I should perform in the present, but it didn't make sense to me. It seemed like so much philosophy–not related to my everyday trials. I'm a jock (whatever that means), and I resist intellectual and philosophical verbiage. I like action, doing things, getting the job done. As soon as living in the moment became real for me, my performance began to change dramatically for the better.

The one basic understanding that made the difference is that I perform best when I savor the moment, hence I am right here and now and love every minute of it. As long as what I'm physically doing at that moment is what I am mentally doing at that moment, everything happened naturally. I don't have to try to get psyched or try to concentrate or try to perform well. I just do it. And when I'm there, I've got excess energy, and I'm mentally on target. My mind and body seem to click. I'm no longer fighting against myself. I understand what is meant by flowing with the current rather than against it.

The price I paid to reach this point has been high. I wonder if it was all that necessary. As I reflect back on the years of struggle, the frustrations, the doubt, the self-condemnation, the agony of knowing what I could do against what I did do, I feel a genuine sadness. Jock or not, my eyes begin to swell as I relive the years. The price was great. Why was it so hard? What made the whole thing so damned difficult?

The answer is painfully clear–*I* did! I kept getting in the way. I was bound and determined to succeed, and I wanted to win at all costs. Nothing would stand in my way. I wanted to prove to myself and to everyone else that I could do it.

My answer was simple; *try harder* and *be stronger.* No one ever tole me that *trying softer, not harder,* might be the key, or that inner calmness would bring me strength. The anger, frustration, agony, and disappointment were not so much from losing as from knowing that I performed considerably below what I was capable of doing. When I wanted it most, I was incapable of performing well. And the reason is now clear– I tried too hard: I was forcing it.

Performing well, I've learned, occurs naturally or it doesn't occur at all. For me, trying to play better, trying not to get angry, trying to concentrate, or trying not to be nervous made the situation worse. I was fighting the current rather than going with it. I've learned there's a difference between trying harder and giving 100 percent effort. I still give 100 percent effort, and I still don't like losing, but there is something distinctively different–I don't get in the way as much anymore.

I used to worry about the guy on the other side. I understand now that it's me, not him, that I should be concerned with.

By comparison, he's easy. I've always been my own toughest opponent (or worst enemy) and I suppose I always will be. The odds are much better now, though. Savoring the moment gives me a handle. It does two things: it brings me back to doing what I'm doing, and it suddenly makes it fun again. Playing my best always seems to happen when I'm feeling a particular way. I feel pumped-up, positive, confident, and invincible. Keeping those feelings for any length of time used to be a problem. Something would happen, even something little, and suddenly they would be gone. All that was left was to try harder, so I did. When I stay with the moment ('within myself') the feelings are much easier to keep, and when I lose them, I can get them back in the same way.

Don't misunderstand. The feelings don't always come, and I still lose them sometimes and can't get them back. I'm still my own toughest opponent, but I'm winning that contest most of the time now. And sometimes the feelings don't come. Even when I go to the moment, they can be a little stubborn. To help them along, I'll start acting *'as if'* they are there. Often that's enough to get the feelings going again. As soon as that happens, I start becoming a performer again.

I used to think those feelings came only when I played well. I had it backwards. I played well because I got the right feelings, and there's a big difference. When I feel right, I perform right, and when I don't, I don't– no matter how hard I try. The right feelings come when I live in every moment, when I love and savor every moment– when I am in the NOW.

I don't know how or why I stayed in sports for as long as I did. I nearly called it quits a hundred times. Whatever it was, I'm thankful because it's been a real personal triumph, a triumph that has made the payoff worth much more than the price. I suppose the price was necessary for me, but that was only because I didn't understand. If only I could get others to understand, but...Would it all seem like just so many meaningless words as it did to me? Maybe not...

Loehr, James . *Mental Toughness Training For Sports,* Stephen Greene Press, 1982

BY BEN YAGODA

GETTING PSYCHED

An athlete's brain may be his most valuable piece of equipment

According to legend, Percy Haughton, the coach of the Harvard eleven from 1908 to 1916, once tried to get his men up for the Yale game by strangling a bulldog in the locker room. The tale is probably apocryphal, but it may as well be true—it undeniably typifies what has always been the prevailing wisdom about athletic inspiration. Knute Rockne invoked the Gipper; the sprinter's uncle in the film Gallipoli made his nephew recite a fevered speech about a leopard before he would let him run; Leo Durocher (predating Billy Martin) incited hysteria by example; and they all worked on the theory that the closer an athlete is to frenzy, the better he will perform. **They were also all wrong.**

In athletics, emotional agitation has limited usefulness at best—a fact Rockne himself came to realize. In a letter qualifying his reputed psychological treatment of the Fighting Irish, he wrote: "I do not make any effort to key them up, except on rare, exceptional conditions...I try to make our boys take the game less seriously than, I presume, some others do."

Rockne discovered that breaking out in a cold sweat and throwing up in the locker room not only are no fun but can also be counterproductive. What he probably didn't know is that an exaggerated sense of a particular match's importance leads to a specific physical reaction called the fight-or-flight syndrome, so named because fighting and running away are the two activities it prepares us for. When the body senses danger—or when, in a stressful situation like third-and-ten, it is fooled into thinking danger is present—the pituitary gland releases a hormone called ACTH. This in turn causes the adrenal gland to release a number of hormones that give the body the temporary strength to perform unaccustomed feats (the favorite example being lifting an automobile to save your child's life).

This capacity can admittedly be helpful when a onetime, king-sized effort is called for—in lifting weights, say, or running the hundred-yard dash. But while this may explain why rah-rah is still dogma in the coaching fraternity, for the vast majority of athletic endeavors calm is significantly more effective.

For one thing, superhuman strength is unsuitable to sports in which accuracy, finesse, and 'touch' are at a premium. For another, the fight-or-flight syndrome brings on a host of decidedly maladaptive (for sports) side effects; the bronchial tubes tighten (hence the term 'choking'); the digestive system shuts down (part of the streamlining of bodily functions preparatory to combat), often inducing nausea; the blood vessels near the skin surface partially close down, causing a clammy feeling; the muscles tense, sometimes bringing on blurred vision, disrupted coordination, and fatigue. As if all this weren't enough, agitation distracts the athlete from the mental tasks at hand-concentration and strategy.

In one of the more creative research studies that have supported these conclusions, subjects were placed in a cabin with four doors, three of which were locked, and told to escape. They found the unlocked door with relative ease and left quickly. But when an urgency was communicated to the subjects by actually shooting nails at them or by shocking them lightly through the floor, their responses became markedly less rational and their exit less efficient. Another researcher charted free-throw-shooting percentages at various stages of basketball games throughout a collegiate conference season; he found that players shot almost 20 percent better when the pressure was off (but not too far off, as when the game seemed out of reach) and consistently better when winning than when losing. Such findings led psychologists to the formulation of the **Yerkes-Dodson Law** which says, essentially, that although simple tasks are more easily performed when one's drive is high, complex tasks are managed more easily when it's low.

The conclusion one draws from this is that athletes should reduce their drive. But how? Certainly not by telling themselves to relax; as anyone who has tried it knows, this is likely to make one more anxious instead.

Fortunately, there are at least two proven, medically accepted ways to calm down. One, outlined by Harvard physician Herbert Benson in ***The Relaxation Response,*** bears more than a passing resemblance to Transcendental Meditation: the tense individual sits in a quiet room, comfortable place, repeating a word for twenty minutes or so while doing his best not to think. For reasons that are still unclear, such behavior leads to a decrease in the metabolic rate, which works as a kind of counter to fight-or-flight stress.

Rather more favored by sports psychologists is the approach of Dr. Edmund Jacobsen, a Chicago physiologist who has devoted his life to the study of relaxation. Jacobsen found that if a muscle is tensed for a half minute or so, it cannot help relaxing when the tension is released. "In his progressive relaxation" program, he had patients alternately flex and make limp their muscles. At the end of each daily session, they were completely calm. Eventually they could drop this procedure and merely give the command to relax; every muscle would obey, as would the mind.

Such revisions of traditional ideas about emotional preparation are only one element of current thinking about the mental side of sports. Another, equally important, involves concentration. Of course, "concentrate" is a venerable command, as well-worn as keep "your eye on the ball." But current research and theory are giving it new meaning.

Consider: After watching five hours of Wimbledon, have you ever had the feeling that your own tennis game has improved by osmosis? The news is that it was no illusion. Sports psychologists are now pointing out that while physical practice is undeniably important, it has been over emphasized at the expense of mental practice. Watching a match, reliving past performances, imagining future ones, even looking hard at a ball—all, it turns out, can be as beneficial as hitting forehands against a backboard for half an hour.

One of the leaders in the field of concentration research is Dr. Richard M. Suinn, head of the psychology department at Colorado State and psychologist for three 1976 United States Winter Olympic teams. In the training technique he has developed— "visuo-motor behavior rehearsal," or VMBR—an instructor first relaxes an athlete, then instructs him to close his eyes and think about playing his

sport. Depending on the subject's needs, Suinn asks him to focus on a failure (in order to tack on a new, successful ending—in Suinn's words, "to spin it"), on a triumph (in order to make it repeatable), or merely on form (in order to help establish a deep behavioral groove in the athlete's psyche).

"What visualization does," Suinn says, "is program the muscles." Every time you do it, you're setting up a kind of computer program. When you get to the competition, all you have to do is press the start button and your body takes over—you're along for the ride.

Suinn has made a routine of the procedure, but many athletes have told of developing such techniques on their own. Jack Nicklaus once wrote:

"I never hit a shot, even in practice, without having a very sharp, in-focus picture of it in my head. It's like a color movie. First I *'see'* the ball where I want it to finish. Then the scene quickly changes and I *'see'* the ball going there....Then there's a sort of a fade-out, and the next scene shows me making the kind of swing that will turn the previous images into reality."

In addition to concluding with something very much like Suinn's mental rehearsal, Nicklaus' 'movies' incorporate what Timothy Gallwey calls programming for results—imagining, over and over again, the ball taking the path you want it to take. Another helpful technique—which Gallwey calls programming and some psychologists call imaging—is running through a conventional practice (swinging the racket, shooting the ball) with your eyes closed, thus focusing and enhancing your concentration.

Of course any field that endorses meditation as an accepted warm-up procedure, treats concentration like the Holy Grail, and in general views the impalpable as essential is bound to attract some people who are interested in more than the nuts and bolts of practical sports training. And so there are those who have considered sports in the light of ethics, psychotherapy-even metaphysics. The most notable adherents of what George Leonard calls the jock-mystique approach are Leonard himself (in *The Ultimate Athlete*), Gallwey (in *The Inner Game of Tennis* and *Inner Skiing*), and Michael Murphy (in *Golf in the Kingdom*). All are associated with or have taught at the Esalen Institute, that Bay Area center of the New Consciousness, and all exalt the transcendental qualities of sports.

To be sure, some of their precepts are grounded in very good sense. Taking as his text *Zen in the Art of Archery*, which holds in part that the very best marksmen are those who do not aim at the target, Gallwey sensibly asks us not to try so hard to do what we've been told is the right thing. He's got a point: having to remember a catechism like "bent knees, body turned, racket back, follow through," and so on is to be in a kind of prison. Equally harmful is judging ourselves. "The trick," writes Gallwey, "is not to identify with your backhand....You are not your tennis game. You are not your body."

To avoid the emotional 'attachment' he feels is at the root of athletic anxiety, Gallwey recommends that the tennis player, for instance, focus all his attention on the ball:

not just keeping his eye on it, but watching the patterns of the seams, even listening to the sounds the ball makes as it flies through the air.

He also suggests concentrating on one's breathing between points. In all, the object is to make the mind "as still as a glass lake."

And yet, while these ideas seem sensible, others appear to be of more dubious value. I'm skeptical, for example, about the idea Leonard and Murphy hold with peculiar conceptions of "energy": how it flows, in mysterious ways, over, under, around, and through us. Were it not so appealingly odd a book, one would find it easy to get annoyed with *Murphy's Golf /In the Kingdom*, an account of the author's encounter with a supposedly real-life Scottish golf pro named Shivas Irons. Shivas—who is made to say things like "Why don't ye gowiyer pretty swing? Let the nothingness into yer shots" —has some strange ideas about golf and life. Murphy quotes from his 'notebooks':

Driving downwind, follow the shot todriving directly into the wind, become the calm solid center. ... Walking downhill, become weightless. Walking uphill, slowly become your strength. Imagine the golf ball as a hole in space.

Well, *na*. Still, some of these ideas may not be quite as farfetched as they sound. Shortly after Murphy's book was published, he was contacted by San Francisco 49er quarterback John Brodie, who reported going through similarly mystical experiences on the football field. "At times, and with increasing frequency now," he told Murphy, "I experience a kind of clarity that I've never seen adequately described. Sometimes, for example, I have all the time in the world to watch the receivers run their patterns, and yet I know the defensive line is coming at me just as fast as ever...The whole thing seems like a dance in slow motion."

Who knows? What seems outlandish now may in a few years be accepted even by the most conservative observers, the way imaging and mental rehearsal are today. In one of the more unlikely passages in the *Inner Game of Tennis*, Gallwey tells his readers to 'learn to love' the tennis ball. "Allow yourself to know the ball both intellectually and through yours senses," he says. "Make friends; do anything to start a relationship with it." (A comparison to competitive swimming would be for the swimmer to learn to love the water or the pool and its surroundings etc.)

That was written in 1974. Two years later, Mark Fidrych, whose conversations with a hardball were like those between good friends, came out of no where to become, for a time, the best pitcher in the American League.

BEN YAGODA wrote the November Sports clinic, "Learning to Leap."