

Chapter 5

CONCENTRATION



Focusing on the
Right Thing at the
Right Time

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What I try to achieve during the season is a relaxed state of concentration. I simply try to cleanse my mind of the pressures that people are trying to heap on me.

NFL Quarterback

Immediately prior to competing, I'm focused on my breathing. I'm aware of that. I also focus on the lane. When I'm on, it is almost silent except for the referee's whistle. I'm really geared into that sound and smaller details.

1992 Olympic Team Swimmer

Concentrate! Keep your head in the game! Stay focused. You've probably heard your coach, teammates and even yourself repeat these and similar phrases over and over again. The ability to maintain concentration while immersed in the pressure of competition is critical to optimum performance. If you lose your focus to a sellout crowd, a distracting competitor, or nagging self-doubt, you are not only battling your opponents, you're battling yourself. Although we may not always be able to eliminate distractions, successful athletes take control of their performance by blocking out unnecessary distractions while responding to important cues.

What Is Concentration?



Concentration is paying attention to the right things at the right time. It is the ability to attend to relevant factors and disregard irrelevant factors.

This is not an easy task given all the internal and external “things” that are present in practice and competition. As you turn with 50m to go, where are you focused? You're waiting for the starter's gun—how is your mind occupied? When you are at the midway point of a T-30, what are you focusing on? What things break your concentration? By identifying the attentional demands of your swimming, you can direct your focus more effectively. Chance favors only the prepared mind. Prepare to excel by preparing to concentrate.

Figuring Out What to Focus on

A primary challenge related to effective concentration is figuring out the “right things” and “relevant factors” to attend to in various practice and competition

situations. While knowing where to focus is no guarantee of being able to concentrate effectively, it is a step in the right direction. In determining “where” to focus, it makes intuitive sense to place mental energy on things that one can control. Rather than focusing on what a competitor is doing in warm-up (which you can’t control), it is more productive to focus on what you can control...your own warm-up.

Controlling the Controllables

An initial strategy to aid in figuring out where to focus is to distinguish between *controllables* and *uncontrollables*. In fact, ineffective concentration can often be traced to focusing on uncontrollable variables. For example,

- ◆ Do you ever fall in to the trap of focusing on mistakes? Nobody is perfect, in the heat of action or in the middle of a set in practice, mistakes happen. If you allow yourself to be distracted by a mistake and dwell on it, you are in fact creating a break in concentration. Let the event go, you can’t change it, move on to the next stroke or the next length and focus your attention in the present, what you can control.
- ◆ Do you get caught focusing too far in the future? Do you play the “what if” game? What if I false start? What if I lose the race? What if I miss a turn? Concentrating on future events also negatively affects concentration. By focusing on the mistakes that may be made in future events poor performance is actually more likely to happen. Again try to focus yourself in the present, here and now - - that is all you can control.

Follow the K.I.S.S. Principle

Keep It Simple, Swimmer. Another strategy is to keep concentration simple. It is easy to get caught up in trying to attend to everything that relates to practice and competition performance. Athletes have a multitude of things they are trying to “manage” (stroke rate, technique, breathing, race strategy, coach feedback, attitude, etc) in competition but it is unrealistic to attempt to focus on them all. Read the following two examples and identify if either of them affects your performance.

- ◆ Attending to too Many External Cues. Being at the competition venue can be overwhelming, so many new sites, people, and other distractions. Athletes sometimes get too caught up in the external stimuli and forget about concentrating on their internal cues.
- ◆ Overanalysis of Body Mechanics. Attending to stroke technique and how you feel in the water is important. However sometimes too much focus on these aspects can lead to deterioration in performance. Finding the right balance of technique focus is important in order to maintain optimal concentration levels.

A general rule of thumb we adhere to at USA Swimming is that it is realistic to attend to no more than 2-3 things during a race or a set in practice. Before a race or a set in practice, identify the 2-3 critical things to attend to such as body

rotation, acceleration into the turn, or maintaining stroke rate. Make sure you can control or manage the 2-3 things you are going to focus on.

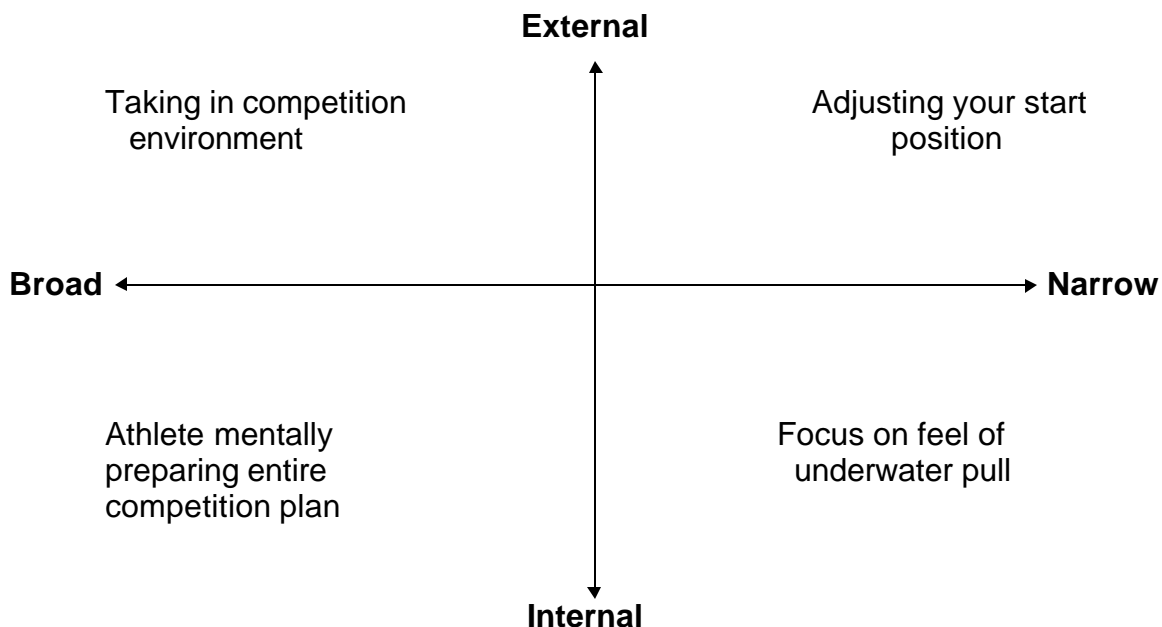
Dimensions of Attentional Style (Adapted from Nideffer & Sharpe, 1978)

Now that we know a little bit about the importance of identifying where to focus your attention, the following information on attentional style may help place it in context. Below is a model developed by sport psychologist Bob Nideffer which illustrates the four different ways athletes have been found to focus their attention. Understanding the four different types of attention, and learning about your own strengths and weaknesses are the first steps toward developing your own concentration skills.

Note that there are two dimensions of attention, **width** (on a continuum from broad to narrow) and **direction** (from internal to external).

1. **Width (broad -- narrow)** refers to how many things you are paying attention to at once. When your attention is broad, you are paying attention to many things. When you have a narrow attentional focus, you are usually concentrating on specifically one or a very few things. A football quarterback, scanning the field for receivers, has to have broad attention, while a golfer getting ready to putt is likely to have a more narrow focus of attention.

2. **Direction (internal -- external)** is defined by whether your attention is focused internally toward your own thoughts and feelings, or externally toward the events in your environment. A swimmer, imaging her upcoming race in her head, has an internal focus, while a baseball player up to bat, has an external focus as he watches the pitch coming in.





How Do I Use This Information?

To make use of the information in this model, first you must determine which of these four attentional styles are your strengths and which styles you need additional assistance developing. Every athlete has his or her own strengths and weaknesses; some athletes are very good at one dimension and weak on the others, while other athletes may be somewhat skilled in all dimensions.

In general, we find that athletes in closed skill sports tend to use a narrow-internal attentional focus. Closed skill sports include sports such as swimming and diving that don't have to react to the changing environment. For the most part they compete against themselves and are in control of the situation. Because swimmer and diver's competition environment is rather static, they need to be more aware of their body and overall energy management. Therefore, closed skill athletes should tend to have a more narrow-internal attentional focus.

This is in contrast to attentional styles of athletes in open skilled sports such as soccer and tennis where the environment is constantly changing, causing the athletes to need to evaluate and reevaluate the situation and then react. Open skill athletes tend to use broad-external attentional skills more often than closed skill athletes do.

The other two attentional styles, broad-internal and narrow-external are important for both open and closed sport athletes to master.

Now, through understanding the different types of attentional styles and the difference between open and closed skills sports, its time to assess your swimming event. Which of Nideffer's attentional skills is top priority in terms of your events demands and your focusing strengths? Exercise 1 is designed to help you systematically review your own competition situation and determine which attentional dimensions you need.

Strategies to Enhance your Concentration Skills

Below is a list of strategies and exercises that can be practiced in order to hone concentration skills.

Understanding “where you attend” in practice. Remember, a challenge in effective concentration is figuring out the relevant things to attend to. Practice is a perfect setting to begin understanding where you focus your attention. For two to three days in practice become very aware of where your focus is directed.

Write down where your attention is focused in your training log (or Exercise 1). After your self-awareness days, evaluate the information to identify where you tend to focus in training.

Chances are at times your attention is all over the place. The critical question to ask is how this affects your performance. At times, it is okay to think random thoughts or sing songs to yourself. But, there are times when doing so probably hurts performance such as when doing drills or during hard intervals. At these times, where should you focus? What strategies can you use to heighten your concentration levels?

Be Realistic. Effective concentration is mentally draining. It takes mental energy to keep your thoughts focused in a relevant, controllable, beneficial direction. It is not necessary or very realistic to expect yourself to focus throughout a practice or meet. However, it is important to identify the “critical moments” when you need to attend to the task at hand. It is at these moments when you want to “kick in” your focus.

Use Cue Words. Cue words are a form of self-talk. Cue words are designed to trigger a specific response, either instructional or motivational. For instance, you can use cue words to direct your attention back to the task at hand. If your mind begins to wander, using a cue word such as “focus” can help you remain on task. Likewise, motivationally cue words serve to remind you of the task at hand, if you feel yourself paying too much attention to stroke technique in the middle of a race, saying “race” to yourself can bring you back to the task at hand.

Practice with Distractions Present. So often the practice situations are calm and controlled, not anything like the racing environment. Coaches, it may be beneficial to set up practice times with difference distractions present, such as an audio tape of meet sounds played during practice or a set of 50’s alternating swimming with goggles filled and swimming without a cap. By exposing your swimmers to typical meet distractions they become immune to them and can then learn how to just concentrate on their swimming

Practice Shifting Attention. We identified the four general quadrants of attention and acknowledged that the situation, in part, dictates the appropriate attentional focus. Given this, a critical skill is the ability to shift - - to go from a broad external to a narrow internal focus. Swimming practice is the ideal place to experiment with shifting attention. Choose three to four places to direct your attention (i.e. stroke count, competition, feel of stroke...). Then set intervals through which you want to scroll through these attentional directions (i.e. every 100 yards, every ½ lap, every 10 strokes). By practicing attention shifting in practice, it will be easier to call upon this skill in competition.

Routines. Creating and practicing a competition routine can help to focus your attention and concentration on the right things at the right time. A competition

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routine is a set of actions that you take each time before you race. Your routine could include the warm-up you do (the amount of yardage, the amount of time it takes you to warm-up, the amount of time you want between warm-up and race...), what you do while waiting for your race (imagery...), how long before the event you go to the blocks, what you do standing behind the blocks preparing for the race, and the race itself. If you take the time before you get to the meet to practice your routine your chances of getting distracted and losing concentration are lessened.

Coaches Guide



How do you teach concentration? How can you tell a kid to “think,” “concentrate” or “focus” and know that he is actually improving his concentration skill? We have provided several grab ‘em exercises and strategies to help you do just that.

Grab ‘em

Older Athletes

At the end of the chapter we have included a concentration grid. This grid is a fun and easy way to demonstrate to your swimmers the power of concentration. The grid is 10 x 10 with numbers ranging from 00 to 99. This is a timed task; usually coaches allow about 1 minute for each trial. Begin with the sheets turned over. Have your swimmers break into pairs - - one does the exercise and the other is the “distracter”. Explain to your swimmers that they are supposed to start with 00, put an X in that box when they find it and then move on to 01, 02, 03... The distracter tries to divert the attention of their partner by talking or yelling at them. At the end of the minute have your swimmers tally the number of boxes they have checked off. Before discussing the exercise, have them switch roles.

When you have finished working with the grid exercise ask some follow-up questions: how did your partner impact your performance? At your best, how were you focused? What happened when you got distracted? Then, make the application to the pool. Discuss how distractions impact performance and emphasize the need for effective concentration.

Younger Athletes

Prepare a tray with 10 to 20 different items on it such as toothpick, paper clip, pencil, stopwatch, goggles, swim cap, heat winner ribbon, etc. Give the athletes 1-minute to study the items on the tray and during this time play some loud music or a tape of swim meet sounds. At the end of the minute instruct the athletes to write down as many things as they can remember.

Follow up with questions similar to the first grab ‘em exercise.

Teaching Concentration

- Ask the swimmers to define concentration and have them explain why it is important.
- Talk about controlling the controllables. Ask your swimmers to list things they can and can’t control in both swimming practice and competition. Use this as a lead in to figuring out where to direct their attention.
- Depending on the ages of the swimmers present the four attentional styles and have your swimmers identify their strengths and weaknesses.
- Cover some of the common concentration problems along with skills to help prevent these problems.
- Use some of the exercises to help athletes become aware of their own concentration practices.

Exercises to Develop Concentration Skills

Several exercises have been included to help you hone your concentration skills. Below is a brief description of these exercises.

Exercise 1a and 1b can be used with both the older and younger swimmers. It asks the swimmers to determine where their attention is focused in many different situations. Once attentional style is determined the athletes can then work to improve their concentration.

Exercise 2 includes several ways to practice focusing under pressure situations. These exercises are designed for the older age group but may be modified for younger swimmers if need be.

Exercise 3, 3a and 3b are included to help athletes establish a refocusing routine. Exercise 3 takes the athletes through creating a refocusing routine. Exercises 3a and 3b can be used as supplementary refocusing sheets, adding some more structure to the way athletes refocus and plan for the inevitable breaks in concentration.

Finally at the end of the chapter a concentration grid is included to use in the Grab 'em exercises.

Concentration Exercise 1a: Identifying your Concentration Tendencies in Practice

After practice, do your best to recall how you were focused/ what you were attending to in the following practice situations.

Day 1
During warm-ups
During technique drills
Last interval of a set
During Drylands
Middle of a kick set
Day 2
During warm-ups
During technique drills
Last interval of a set
During Drylands
Middle of a kick set
Day 3
During warm-ups
During technique drills
Last interval of a set
During Drylands
Middle of a kick set

After completing the 3rd day, go back and assess how the focus impacted your performance (positive, neutral, or negative). In cases where the impact was neutral or negative, identify how you would prefer to focus in those situations.

Concentration Exercise 1b: Where Am I Focusing?

Use this exercise to help identify your tendencies related to attentional style.

During repeat 100's:

During stroke drills in practice:

While standing on the blocks:

Coming off a turn in a race:

When you get DQed:

When you are leading a race:

When your goggles fall off:

When you have a great race/set:

Which attentional style(s) do most of your answers fit into? Which attentional style(s) do you need to work on?

Concentration Exercise 2: Focusing Under Pressure

Below are several ideas for ways to practice focusing under pressure.

1. Change of Focus Drill. Select a period of time (anywhere from 30 seconds to 2 minutes) during which you direct your focus to only one aspect of a performance or skill. Change focus during the following time interval.

For example, you might switch your focus among the following three areas:

1. Kicking - how do my legs feel?
2. Rotation – how is my body rotation?
3. Breathing - am I breathing easily?

In the space below, note some areas that you could practice switching your focus:

2. Simulation Training. Recreate a competitive situation in practice. Simulated competition experiences enable you to become so familiar with competing stimuli that you are no longer distracted by these stimuli.

3. Distraction Drills. Practice following your performance routine despite verbal and visual distractions deliberately performed by your teammates, coaches, or others. For example, during a “hero” swim, have your teammates yell distracting comments and verbally taunt you. During warm up, switch back and forth between allowing your mind to wander for 50m then bringing your thoughts and focus back to swimming for the next 50m.

4. Quality Practice. This workout design is short and intense. You must be ready as soon as practice begins and warm-up ends. You have only one opportunity to swim a given distance from a standing start. Over time, your ability to focus intensely while performing well will increase.

Concentration Exercise 3: Establishing a Refocus Routine

- 1. Recognize distractions.** Identify the factors in swimming which are likely to distract your attention or draw your focus away from crucial elements of performance.
- 2. Select your focus.** Identify the factors in your performance, which require your concentration. Where **should** your focus be?
- 3. Prepare to concentrate.** Concentration requires a passive, relaxed mindset. It is therefore helpful to begin to recognize and reduce stress and anxiety. Too much stress destroys attentional focus. While it may be unrealistic to keep your environment stress-free, pay attention to the stress you **can** control or limit versus that which is out of your control and therefore not worth focusing on.
- 4. Create concentration cues.** Use attentional words, images, or actions as reminders to concentrate. Called “cues,” these words, images, or actions should be simple, positive and personally meaningful.
- 5. Create your own refocusing routines.** Anticipate possible distracters and decide how you will respond to them. These responses are your refocusing routines. Practice your refocusing routines until they are effective and instinctive. If you plan what you will do between events or competition days you will find you can bring your concentration under control. Refocusing routines reduces uncertainty and decrease susceptibility to distractions. See Chapter 7 on Mental Preparation, which will give you additional refocusing strategies.

During your training sessions over the next week, make a mental note of the distractions that interfere with your concentration. Record this information in the graph on the next page. Do this immediately after practice or during a break, when the experience is still fresh in your memory.

Concentration Exercise 3: Refocus Form A

Distractions	Coping response to minimize negative impact	Attentional cue
Comments by spectators or opponents	Centering breath, followed by positive affirmation	"Focus on my race"
Poor morning swim	Focus on specific aspects of upcoming race	"Another opportunity"
Negative thoughts and self-doubts	Immediately use thought-stopping technique, replace with positive, productive affirmation	Visualize big red stop sign

Concentration Exercise 3: Refocus Form B

Use the situations provided below or supply your own as you anticipate and plan for the unexpected. (Adapted from Orlick, 1986)

Refocusing Plan

If my heat is delayed, I will...

If there is a false start, I will...

If I am in lane 1 (and never swim well in lane 1), I will...

If I have a bad warm-up, I will...

If I swim poorly in prelims, I will...

Other possibilities...

Concentration

38	28	51	09	71	16	72	82	63	04
10	32	44	62	21	97	18	40	90	52
25	85	57	46	66	35	78	96	11	69
74	03	75	93	00	56	22	67	49	20
43	13	23	33	79	95	76	05	59	45
65	86	50	19	41	07	37	83	29	61
58	02	34	77	27	55	92	48	01	89
15	47	73	87	39	68	12	53	84	70
24	64	81	06	91	60	88	30	98	14
99	31	42	94	17	54	80	26	36	08