



The Gym That Never Closes

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So you're having a little trouble throwing strikes, or getting out of a sand trap, or making your free throws, or nailing your dismount, or whatever specific skill you may struggle with from time to time in your sport. What do you do? Practice, of course. *Every athlete* goes through rough stretches and you just have to work your way through it without losing confidence. It's part of the game. It's part of being an athlete.

I want to introduce you to another way to practice. I want you to know about a tool and technique that is used by the top athletes in every sport. And the best thing of all is that this is something you can do—a way to practice—at any time and anywhere. It's a gym that never closes because it is the gym of your mind.

Mental Imagery, or mental reps as I prefer to call it, is a technique that has been widely used by athletes for decades. Some research suggests mental imagery may help by creating and practicing a mental script for performance that the brain recognizes when the real situation is presented. Other theories suggest that rehearsal done in the mind positively impacts athlete's psychological state by building confidence and reducing performance anxiety. My experience suggests it works at both levels. Regardless of the exact mechanism, once learned, mental imagery can be applied in many different ways to aid athletes.

As with any technique, whether it is a physical skill or a *mental mechanic*, it is critical that you do it properly. So, let's talk about the basics of mental imagery so you can activate your mental gym membership.

Step One: Relax. Get comfortable and do some good abdominal breathing to prepare yourself for your mental workout.

Step Two: Be specific. What skill or situation do you want to work on? Is it a certain shot? A particular play? Decide in advance what you will work on.

Step Three: Set a confident mindset. Tell yourself that you will execute the skill you've chosen perfectly and expect that this will help you come game time. You really are about to do some extra practice, and that always pays off.

Step Four: Engage your senses. Try to engage as many senses as you can. This improves the effectiveness of your mental reps. Close your eyes and *see* the field with all of its markings. *Feel* the grass under your feet. *Hear* the familiar sounds. You get the idea.

Step Five: Take the proper perspective. Many young athletes feel mental imagery is like watching a highlight reel in their imagination. While this may help get someone fired up or build some confidence (both good things), it is not the way athletes effectively used imagery to practice in the mental gym. The perspective you want to take is an **inside-out view**. You want to see the skill you're going to work on just as you would when you play – like the dashboard cameras on NASCAR coverage. In this way, you're an active participant, not a passive observer.

Step Six: Start taking mental reps! Once you've decided what you want to work on and engaged your senses from the correct (inside-out) perspective, it's time to do that extra practicing. Execute the skill you've chosen *exactly* as you want to. Feel confident as you make free throw after free throw, or stick that landing, or sink those mid-range putts. You're improving your game!

Like anything else in sports, the more you practice, the better you'll get. By regularly committing some time to developing your ability to use mental imagery you'll be able to get in some "extra reps", develop a critical athletic muscle (your brain) and earn a lifetime membership to a gym that never closes.