



Elite athletes slow down the game and anticipate the play before it happens. How? Some may be born with natural and innate talents or abilities. Brain research suggests that this skill can be developed with practice and repetition. Athletes who spend time visualizing 10-15 minutes per day often report that the game slows down and they are better able to anticipate and perform.

Our Brains can be trained and coached. Two concepts are at work here.

- 1) Hebb's Principle says "Neurons that fire together wire together." To demonstrate this principle try the following exercise.

Find your heart rate on your wrist or carotid artery. Then close your eyes and visualize yourself exercising intensely. After 15-20 seconds your heart rate should be elevated. When visualizing you are firing the same neurons in your brain that you do when you exercise. Because neurons that fire together wire together, your heart rate increases as it would when you actually exercise.

Many studies confirm that mental rehearsal or visualization enhances performance and in some studies those who practice a skill and complement their practice with visualization outperform those who only physically practice a skill.

- 2) Neuroplasticity is the second concept. This concept explains why it is difficult to change a bad habit. You can overcome a bad habit by developing a new one rather than trying to stop cold turkey. People of any age can generate new neural pathways. When we reinforce the new neural pathway over and over, we can eventually overpower old neural pathways.

There are 6 guidelines to remember in designing your own visualization program.

- 1) Visualize yourself playing in well or in your Optimal Performance Zone.
- 2) The key to any visualization is consistency. In order for visualization to be most effective an athlete must practice at least 5 days per week for 10-15 minutes per day.
- 3) In order to judge its effectiveness an athlete needs to practice consistently. Inconsistent practice limits results.
- 4) At first it may feel labored, awkward, and uncomfortable but as you practice it will become more comfortable and easy each time you practice.
- 5) You will find that you will become distracted by random thoughts. This does not mean you are visualizing incorrectly. This is normal. Just notice what they are and let them pass like tweets on your twitter feed.
- 6) Any visualization needs to include all 5 senses, your emotions and how your body feels as you visualize the situation. It can be helpful to record your own voice doing a guided visualization. The sound enhances Hebb's principle and makes it easier to access.