

3 Strategies for Handling Distractions in Competition

By David Benzel

Disney Pixar's movie "UP" hit it "out of the park" with their character "Dug."

Do you remember him? He was the talking dog that would always say, "Squirrel!" mid-sentence. Regardless of what was going on, Dug would lose his train of thought by the distraction of a nearby squirrel.

Parents everywhere chuckle and more than likely can relate because children so often respond the same way.

Distractions can seem like the enemy of focus – and there seems to be an unending supply of them during sports competitions.

Even if external distractions such as noisy fans, bad weather, or a crying baby are limited, athletes still need a way to quiet the internal distractions. These might include anxious thoughts about performance or fear regarding an opponent.

A good working definition of focus is this: Pay attention to the most important things and avoid giving attention to all the things that matter less.

What are the most important things? In sports, it would be to focus on the moment by moment execution of your skills.

Easier said than done.

Here are 3 strategies that can equip young athletes with a way to regain focus in the moment.

1) Game Plan Thoughts

Anyone who participates in sports knows that distractions are an equal opportunity diverter. In other words, we all fall victim to distractions from time to time – young, old, elite and novice athletes – no one is immune.

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One strategy that enables athletes to perform consistently at top levels, in spite of distractions, is a choreographed mental plan on how to respond to them.

Kids can be coached to focus on the positive thoughts that help them to be successful on their best days.

- What are they thinking on their way to practice?
- What do they think about during warm-up?
- What are they thinking during the actual practice?
- What do they think when they make a mistake?

Awareness of positive and negative thoughts in these 4 areas, and more importantly, how it impacts their performance, is a powerful tool.

However, have you noticed that some athletes can repeatedly perform strongly in practice, only to fail when it comes to game time?

This is because the emotions, stressors, and regulations are entirely different during a competition. For this reason, it is necessary to have a similar mental plan for games.

How-to: Talk with athletes about their answers to the 4 questions (mentioned above.) Once they are aware of the thoughts connected to **successful** practices they can use the same thought processes to come up with a specific plan for competitions.

2) Visual Anchor



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Can you spot it – that particular look on your athlete’s face when you know their mind has wandered from the moment at hand?

Maybe it is a look of frustration as she fails to use her backhand grip that she had perfected in practice. Perhaps that dreaded look is one of fear as he stands on the blocks and looks down the swim lane before the gun goes off.

If that look appears during a game/meet/match you desperately think of ways to “snap” them back into focus.

A visual anchor can do just that.

For the tennis player, a good visual anchor might be the brand logo on their tennis racquet. The swimmer might choose to hone in on the edge of the block they are diving off of.

In either case, the sight of the anchor prompts the athlete to refocus and block out any negative thoughts or distractions.

How-to: Choose a visual cue that can be easily viewed. Rehearse in practice the “train-of-thought” that should occur when the athlete looks at the cue. Use the cue to bring an athlete back to the focus-at-hand during competition.

3) Purposeful Listening

Drowning out noisy disturbances can seem impossible at times. This is especially true if it is a loud external distraction, such as an obnoxious spectator, or the recognizable sound of their parent’s voice. In some cases, it might be a new, never-experienced interruption like the marching band practicing on a nearby field.

Whatever the challenge may sound like, it is helpful to train athletes to purposefully listen to only what they need to hear. Teach them that through practice they can control what they are listening to – even when there are multiple and competing sounds.

How-to: Turn on two radios, set to different stations. Choose just one to listen to. After some time begin listening to only the second one. Athletes can practice going back and forth between concentrating on what is coming from just one radio at a time.

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Moving Forward

Learning to manage distractions is just like learning any other skill set – it becomes most effective when it is practiced regularly. Teach athletes these helpful strategies to regain their focus in a game and then be sure to apply them each time they are working on their sport:

- Devise a specific, choreographed mental game plan for distractions
- Focus on a predetermined visual anchor to trigger specific thoughts
- Purposefully listen to one source when multiple sounds are happening

[CLICK HERE](#) to ask David Benzel a question about this topic:

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