

Get Your Head in the Game and Keep It There

By Darren Krusselbrink

For players to play up to their abilities, their mind and body have to work in unison. When they don't, the result is usually a less than stellar performance. Players start making poor decisions, and their ability to execute technical skills drops as well. It's at times like this that an exasperated coach will blurt out, "Get your head in the game!"

Being focussed on the game means that your mind is in the right mental time and place. Imagine that time extends across three time zones; the past, present, and future. Physically, it is impossible to go back in time or ahead in time, we can only do things in the present. Since the ability of any hockey player to achieve anything on the ice depends, ultimately, on where and how they physically move, the present is the only point in time that anything can be achieved.

However, your mind is capable of being in the past, present, or future. The mind is more flexible than the body that way. It can focus on what happened in the past - on the good plays or the bad, it can consider what might happen in the future-on the good or bad things that might happen, or it can take in what's going on around you at the moment. Even in the present, you can focus on what you should be doing to do your job, or you can be distracted by irrelevant things. Consider the role of agitators like Theo Fleury or Claude Lemieux. Part of the reason those guys are successful is that they can get the minds of some of their opponents off of what they're supposed to be doing, and on to thoughts of revenge and bodily harm.

What's important to know is that the mind needs something to focus on. Picture the mind like a hand that always needs something to hold on to. What this means is that to play at their best, players need to make sure their mind is focused on something that will maximize their abilities, not diminish them. For players to maximize their abilities, the mind and body need to be in synch. Being in synch means that both mind and body are working together in the same time and place. Since the body can only operate in the present, for the mind and body to be in synch, the mind needs to operate in the present as well. The mind also needs to be focused on the space that the body has to move to.

In hockey, this means that when players are on the ice, the only thing that's important is what's happening on the ice at the time. On the bench plays can be rehashed (focus on the past), or planned (focus on the future), but during a shift players full attention should be focused on reading the play, and deciding what to do next. If their attention is anywhere else, it reduces their ability to play up to their potential. Everyone knows that players can't play their best at 80% of their physical potential, mental potential is no different. If players' minds aren't 100% on the play, they can't play their best.

If the mind is a time zone ahead or behind the body, the two will be out of synch. If the body is on the ice and the mind is even partially off somewhere else, mind and body won't be fully in synch and players will play below their abilities.

Keeping your mind focused in the present, and on the right things, although a simple concept, isn't as easy as it sounds. How many times have you caught yourself on the ice thinking about what would happen if you screwed up? Or thinking about what the coach or scouts might be thinking about you? If left alone, the mind has a tendency to jump all over the place, and more often than not, it will latch on to a thought, image, or feeling that will hold you back. It takes discipline and practice to train the mind to stay in the present and focus only on relevant things, but it can be done. To consistently get the best out of themselves, mental control is something that all players should learn.

How can you train for mental control? You only need to practice two things. First, you need to learn to become more aware of what your mind is focussed on. Do you find yourself thinking about the past, something irrelevant, or worrying about the future when you play? Second, when you catch your mind a time zone ahead or behind, or in the wrong place, you need to refocus it. Picture your mind letting go of whatever thought, image, or memory it's holding on to, and picture it grabbing a hold of something in the moment, and in a space around your body. To keep his mind in the game, the strategy a goalie used to keep his head in the game during stoppages in play was to lean on his stick and stare at a rut in the ice just ahead of his pads. Combined with focussing on his breathing, he said he could consistently keep his mind in the present, and on the ice surface.

Keeping your head in the game is a challenge, but it's worth the effort. There's a reason playoff veterans are in high demand towards the end of the season. They've learned how to keep their mind in the right time and place and can play their best under the pressure of the post season when less experienced players start worrying about it.