

Improving Your Concentration

Understanding Concentration

Concentration can be defined as the focus of attention on a selected target or signal. Concentration or selective focus of attention can vary in intensity. The more complete the focus of attention, the greater the level of concentration.

Skills for concentration fall into two major categories: First, focus of attention on targeted, relevant information, and second, dissociation from non-targeted, irrelevant, and potentially distracting information.

As an official you may have found that you are excellent at directing your attention when distractions are low. You may falter when the distractions increase. Movement on the sideline, crowd noise, airplanes flying overhead, and coaches yelling instructions are examples of external distractions that can break concentration, meaning that the attention is grabbed by the distraction. The outcome is a split in the official's attention.

Distractions may be either internal or external. Internal distractions are thoughts, feelings, perceptions or any internal information, which is other than the game itself on which the official should be focused. When internal distractions occur, the official must focus on the signal and dissociate from the internal noise. When external distractions occur, the official needs to do the same - focus on the signal and dissociate from the noise, only in this case, the noise is external. These tasks for concentration may sound difficult, if not impossible. The elimination of all extraneous noise, externally and internally, is the ideal. Maintaining that ideal is central to officiating a good game.

A Test for Concentration Skill

An assessment of concentration skill in relation to external noise can be done with a brief and interesting test called the Grid Concentration Exercise. This test is used widely in Eastern Bloc countries, where performance on this test is sometimes the basis for selection of team members immediately before a competition.

The exercise is performed by checking off consecutive numbers in a grid. The grid has 10 rows and 10 columns, with each box in the grid containing a number from 0 to 99. The greater the number of consecutive numbers marked within a **one-minute** period, the greater the concentration level of the subject. Athletes with high concentration skill score in the high twenties and even the low thirties. Typical scores are in the range of half those numbers.

A number of testing variations can be performed with this exercise. After the initial testing, a second round of the exercise can be done with external distractions, such as playing loud music. With the second test, participants begin at number 33 to reduce the practice effect. Or, a number at random can be selected as the beginning point. Participants can also be instructed to start with a particular number and mark consecutive descending numbers or odd or even numbers.

By establishing test variations with different levels of distraction, you can arrive at an assessment of your relative concentration skill level.

Using this assessment tool is a first step. Mental skill development just like physical skill development requires commitment and consistent practice. Some athletes do achieve deep levels of concentration without special training. However, others can learn to concentrate with the depth of peak performers. Concentration skill - the ability to direct full attention to a task - can be developed. An excellent method that officials can use to be less susceptible to distractions is simulated match training.

Simulated Match Training

Significant differences separate practice or training sessions and competitions and rightly so. You do not want to practice with as much tension and anticipation as competitions. Nor do you want to see competitions neutralised by having them as routine as training sessions. A certain right rhythm marks the process of training hard and cycling up to peak for a particular game. However, excellent reasons exist for simulated match training.

Simulated match training is a staged, close approximation to the conditions and atmosphere of a competition. Beyond quality training, simulated match training gives players and official's tournament experience in an accelerated fashion.

Simulated match training reduces the novelty of games and exposes the official to a variety of factors that can and do arise during competitions.

In simulated match training, officials quickly become competition experienced. They receive direct experience with the distractions that they can expect to confront in competitions.

Simulated match practices are like tournaments. They do not take the spice out of competition, but they do reduce the strain of competitions by training officials to stay concentrated in spite of external distractions.

Contact your local club and recommend simulated matches be organised during training. Not only will the players get a lot out of it, but you'll benefit from the experience and can receive feedback from those involved at the end of the session.

Summary

Concentration creates the best mental stage for athletes to perform at their physical best. To explore your officiating potential by using mental skills requires a long-term commitment. To have officials perform with a focused and an unruffled mind requires consistent practice of concentration and the other mental skills associated with optimal performance.

84 27 51 78 59 52 13 85 61 55

28 60 92 04 97 90 31 57 29 33

32 96 65 39 80 77 49 86 18 70

76 87 71 95 98 81 01 46 88 00

48 82 89 47 35 17 10 42 62 34

44 67 93 1 107 43 72 94 69 56

53 79 05 22 54 74 58 14 91 02

06 68 99 75 26 15 41 66 20 40

50 09 64 08 38 30 36 45 83 24

03 73 21 23 16 37 25 19 12 63

Grid Concentration Exercise Directions: Beginning with 00, put a slash through each number in the proper sequence. From the Athlete's Guide to Sports Psychology (Leisure Press, 1984) by Dorothy V. Harris and Bette L. Harris p. 189.