

TRAINING WITH MENTAL PICTU

How Imagining Success OUTSIDE the Water
Can Give You an Edge IN the Water

by Simone La Pay

“**Y**es You Can Yes You Can Yes You Can Yes You Can . . .”
This is the mental imagery script that

Marcia Cleveland of Chicago, who swims with Team Illinois Masters, developed when she was training to swim the

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English Channel in 1994. “Every time I was feeling down, I kept saying that, and hearing *yes, yes, yes,*” Cleveland says. “I still use that script today, in

swimming and in my life.”
“One-two, breathe ... one, breathe ... three-four, breathe ... one-two-three-four, flip squeeze ... tight-arrow arms ... legs!”

This is the script of a sprinter mentally preparing for a well-timed flip turn in a 100-meter freestyle race. No pool is required for this exercise, because it's an application of the technique called mental

imagery. Mental imagery involves creating an internal picture of an athletic accomplishment, and playing it over and over until the picture of success can become the reality of success in the pool or open water. Many athletes—including swimmers and triathletes—use mental imagery as a formal part of their training. And it works.

“Athletes of all levels can benefit from doing imagery on a consistent basis. Imagery can be used for learning new skills, error correction and going over a peak performance,” says Karlene Sugarman, author of the 1999 book, *Winning the Mental Way*, and associate professor with John F. Kennedy University's sport psychology program in Pleasant Hill, Calif.

Also known as mental practice, mental rehearsal, visualization and self-hypnosis, mental imagery has become the preferred term to describe structured mental training—a collection of techniques that have athletes use imagination,

sight, sound, smell, movement and action to create their pictures. The goal of mental imagery is to create an experience of athleticism without being involved in the real-life situation, say Jim Taylor and Gregory S. Wilson in their 2005 book, *Sport Psychology: Four Perspectives*.

When she was training to swim the English Channel, Cleveland hung a shipping map of the Dover Strait (the narrowest part of the channel) in her bedroom. “I saw it every morning when I got out of bed,” she says. Although she was not yet involved in the real-life situation of swimming the channel, the mental image of the Dover Strait reminded Cleveland of her upcoming experience and encouraged her that she could finish the course.

Cleveland also collected a variety of motivational quotations that she would recite to herself during training. Among her favorites: “If I can dream it, I can do it.” “It's almost over; I

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know I can finish. The difficult part is behind me.” And of course: “Yes, you can!”

Imagining a perfect flip turn in a 100-meter freestyle race doesn't ensure success unless the athlete is trained and talented enough to execute the move, but mental imagery can give any swimmer an edge. Studies have shown that mental imagery really does produce physiological changes. As early as 1931, an American clinical psychologist named Edmund

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Jacobsen proved that when people imagine lifting a weight with their arm, they generate electrical activity in their arm muscles. Modern researchers theorize that neuromuscular activity produced by mental imagery helps athletes reinforce the proper movement patterns they already have learned.

Even beginners can use mental imagery to help themselves move to the next level. Experts recommend a mental training program

designed specifically for the individual. Most athletes start with a general idea of what they want to change, and then create images to support their goals. A swimmer, for example, might have a wide range of goals—including a simple increase in motivation, improvement of a particular stroke, or race strategies in preparation for a big event like the FINA World Master's Championships.

"You need to see it before

you can be it," says Ande Rasmussen, an Austin, Texas-based Longhorn Aquatics Masters Swimming Team member.

"Mental imagery helps in several ways. In practice, it helps you see yourself as great, and then in performance, you are great. Also, in practice, mental imagery gives you confidence. And then before a race, it calms your nerves, because you have pictured in your mind how you want to be."

Rasmussen adds, "The world

goes where the attention flows. If you visualize something positive, something positive will happen."

For swimmers who work out mostly for stress reduction and socialization, the goal of mental imagery might be simply to relax during swim practice. That's why individual goals are the key. Swimmers should ask themselves whether they want to use mental imagery to stay calm and relaxed, or to get psyched up

Interview with an Expert

Jennifer Moilanen is a sports psychology consultant who helps athletes, business people and performers of all skill levels achieve their performance goals using mental imagery. Through her company, Ultimate Performance Consulting, Moilanen has worked with thousands of young people throughout California's Bay Area, helping them be successful not only in sports, but also in academics and life. She also is an adjunct faculty member for the sport psychology program at John F. Kennedy University.

SWIMMER: Does mental imagery really work?

Moilanen: Absolutely. Imagery can work for anyone, at any level, for any purpose. All it takes is practice. Start with beginning imagery exercises, such as imagining taking a bite out of a lemon (seeing the lemon, smelling the lemon, feeling the lemon and working up to tasting the lemon). Once you feel comfortable with the beginning exercises, [you can] move on to more advanced imagery, eventually using imagery in any aspect of your life.

SWIMMER: But can a beginning Masters swimmer really benefit from mental imagery?

Moilanen: All athletes, regardless of their skill level, can benefit. As a beginner Masters swimmer, imagery can help take you to the next level. Examples of when and where a beginner Masters swimmer can use imagery include 1) visualizing a meet the night before in your room; 2) during the down time at a meet, imagining what you need to do to be successful in your upcoming event; and 3) before practice, imagining making any necessary corrections to your stroke or breathing.

SWIMMER: How much time should a Masters swimmer commit for mental imagery to be successful?

Moilanen: Imagery sessions can be any length that is suitable for the situation. An imagery session can be as short as five or ten minutes, or may be as long as an hour. Practicing imagery in short increments throughout the day is beneficial, especially for beginners. The sessions can be completed anywhere and anytime, as long as you are able to give the concentration necessary for that period of time.

SWIMMER: What team, individual or organization uses mental imagery as a formal part of the training regiment?

Moilanen: Clients I have worked with who incorporate imagery into their performance routines include a professional middle-weight boxer (relieving anxiety before entering the ring), an all-state cross country runner (maintaining stamina throughout a race), a Masters-level shooter (using imagery to help focus and concentrate on the target), and Masters-level swimmers and divers (using imagery for pain management, reducing their time during competition and visualizing corrections or changes in strokes or their breathing patterns).

Imagery Script for Swimming Race Simulation

Imagine entering the pool area. You smell the chlorine. You hear the echoing voices. The coaches and their swimmers are milling around. You take off your shirt and stretch to get ready for the event. You hear the splashing, and the beep of the starter for other races.

This is your best race, and you're ready for it. You're as fit as you have ever felt. You hear the starter call the 100 Free. You step up on the blocks. The starter says, "Take your marks, and you bend into your starting position, waiting for the beep.

You launch into a powerful dive, streamlined. Your first powerful kick brings you to the surface, and you begin strong strokes. You see yourself from above. You are powerful and beautiful. Everything is working. With each stroke, you feel stronger and stronger.

You approach the first turn. You are focused on nothing but your race. You throw your legs over perfectly, pushing off the wall into a tight, streamlined shape, gliding smoothly. You enter the second half of your race. Your strokes are smooth and powerful. Your breathing is perfect.

You tap into your reserve energy. You are exceeding your own expectations. You surge toward the wall and touch. You pull off your goggles and look up at the scoreboard. You won! And you beat your previous best time. You hear your breath slowing to normal. You become aware of the sights and sounds around you. You are a great swimmer.

Editor's Note: This script was written for a 100M free event, but may be adapted for other events.

for a race. Deep relaxation techniques are good for calming pre-race jitters, but other mental imagery techniques work better for motivation.

Some athletes who practice mental imagery keep written notes of how they feel when they perform well and when they perform poorly. Then they create mental images that duplicate the feelings they associate with high performance.

After deciding what to accomplish, the athlete's next step is to design a practice, says Bruce Hale, a kinesiologist at Penn State University and author of *Imagery Training: a Guide for Coaches and Performers*. Hale suggests that four "Rs"—relaxation, realism, regularity and reinforcement—will enhance imagery practice. Many serious athletes create mental imagery scripts, either composed on paper or in an audio recording.

Mental imagery scripts typically are broken down into three sections. The first section lists goals and sets up a basic sequence for the imagined action. The second section paints the goal into a picture. The third section refines the image descriptions into complete paragraphs.

For best results, coaches and mental imagery consultants recommend practicing a mental imagery program for up to 10 minutes per session, up to three or four times per week. They also suggest scheduling the practice for a regular time, such as before bedtime, in the morning when the athlete wakes up, or on a lunch break at work. Some athletes practice in their cars 10 minutes or so before swim practice. The plan should suit the athlete's lifestyle. And all plans should include a periodic evaluation of performance to help the athlete decide when to make changes.

Swimmers interested in optimizing their mental imagery experience also should consider hiring a sports psychology con-

sultant to help. A trained professional can assess the athlete's specific needs, and also can meet with a coach to make sure the plan reflects goals the athlete and coach have agreed on. Experts say to look for someone certified by the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sports Psychology (AAASP). AAASP consultants are recognized by the U.S. Olympic Committee as qualified to provide services to Olympic-level and elite athletes.

Athletes also use mental imagery to incorporate changes in their techniques. Like many sports, swimming continues to change. The breaststroke, for example, has been completely overhauled during the past 15 years. Some swimmers may be still swimming the old flat-style breaststroke because they are afraid they won't be able to learn the new style.

Practicing mental imagery can help swimmers relearn the stroke. Researchers agree that

imagining a new skill can help increase the speed athletes memorize new movement patterns. An accurate image also can be a benchmark for analyzing errors the athlete makes in reality, and for answering questions about proper technique and execution.

Scientists "have been examining the impact of imagery on the modification of a wide variety of motor and sport skills for decades, using a variety of research techniques ranging from experimental to case studies," says Penny McCullagh, a sport and exercise psychologist at California State University, East Bay. Considered as a whole, the research "clearly indicates that imagery is an effective performance modification intervention." <<<

>>> For more information on mental imagery, go to the web site for the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sports Psychology (AAASP) at www.aaasponline.org.

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