

## "I'LL BELIEVE IT WHEN I SEE IT!"

**H**ave you ever said this? The likelihood is yes, as it's a common statement people say. The reason for this is because it is true and it is especially true in relation to sport and our accomplishments. Have you ever 'seen yourself' getting into a good position during a mass swim start, mentally rehearsing a change in stroke technique or pulling over rolling barrels in freestyle? If you have created pictures like this in your head then you can also believe that you're a successful swimmer. Seeing yourself perform

Use imagery to enhance your performance in the open water. By Helen Davis

# SEEING IS BELIEVING!

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well creates a positive belief about your ability to succeed in swimming – seeing really is believing! This technique of mentally rehearsing aspects of your performance is called imagery, and by using it effectively you can provide vision to program your mind and body to respond in an optimal way for performance.

### WHAT IS IMAGERY?

Imagery can be defined as using one's senses to recreate or create an experience in the mind. The power of imagery allows athletes to practise sport skills, strategies and mental skills without physically being in a training or competitive environment. This practice in your mind allows your brain to actually send chemical signals through your brain and nervous system making the same connections as if you were to physically practise. Of course, this mental practice cannot replace physical practice, but it can enhance it. By creating these connections in your brain and nervous system it enables physical execution to become easier.

### DOES IT WORK?

The resounding answer from research is yes! Research evidence has shown that using imagery can enhance sport performance in three main ways: by enhancing your performance and learning, enhancing your thoughts and emotions and athletes who report using it as part of their preparation are successful.

### Benefits of imagery

| ENHANCES PERFORMANCE AND LEARNING        | ENHANCES THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS       | SUCCESSFUL ATHLETES USE IT!   |
|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| Mental practice of skill over time       | <b>Increased Self-confidence</b>     | Successful athletes use imagery more extensively and systematically than less successful athletes |
| Using imagery to prepare for competition | Increased Motivation                 |   |
| Part of a mental training program        | <b>Increased attentional control</b> |   |
|  | Reduction in anxiety                 |   |

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## HOW CAN IMAGERY BE USED IN SWIMMING?

There are numerous ways imagery can be used in swimming: here are some examples.

### TO IMPROVE TECHNIQUE

- Mentally rehearse a change in stroke technique
- Imagine analogies or objects to aid technique (eg, scooping ice cream into your mouth for breaststroke (my favourite!), swimming like a dolphin for butterfly kick or pulling over barrels for freestyle)

### TO PREPARE FOR A RACE

- Get pumped up for a race by remembering a time where you had past success
- Preparing for a race by visualising yourself performing really well
- Imagine breathing in the colours you associate with calmness and breathing out in the colours you associate with worry or nerves

### TO SWIM FASTER

- Imagine a fishing line from the top of your head to the end of the wall, lake, river or finish line and imagine getting reeled in
- Imagine people important to you watching you practise or race

### TO RECOVER AFTER INJURY

- Mentally rehearse your swimming to keep yourself attuned to how it feels
- Imagine your injury healing and imagine yourself fully healed. Research has shown that this can actually speed up the recovery process

These are just a few examples of the many ways you can use imagery to your advantage. Have a go at using imagery to practise something and see how you get on. As you start to become aware of your ability to use

your imagination, creativity will flow. Evidence suggests that the more realistic you make your imagery, the more effective and beneficial it will be to you.

## IS IT EASY TO DO?

Like any new skill using imagery requires effort and practice. Successful imagery incorporates the five senses, but including emotion and relaxation will also help its effectiveness. When you next swim, see how attuned you are to your senses; notice the smell of the water, listen to the splash and streaming of water, feel the pressure of the water on your hands or take in your surroundings visually. In addition to the five senses, try and make your imagery

**MENTAL PRACTICE CANNOT REPLACE PHYSICAL PRACTICE, BUT IT CAN ENHANCE IT**

experiences as realistic as possible. Feel the intense emotions before you race, try and use them to your advantage. Experience the ease of swimming fast, when your stroke feels great and you are moving effortlessly through the water. Let your body respond

to the excitement and satisfaction of being successful. See yourself finish your race with a smile on your face! Remember, recreating these emotions is training your brain to enable it to feel like this when you physically do it. When practising using imagery your aim is to be calm and relaxed, so sit down and get comfortable.

### RELAXATION

An important part of using imagery is to keep your muscles relaxed as you visualise a scenario. To help get yourself into a relaxed state to enable you to use imagery effectively, try some of the following relaxation techniques:

- Sit in a comfortable position in a quiet place
- Close your eyes
- Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at the top of your head and progressing to your feet (feet to head if you prefer)
- Concentrate on your breathing as you breathe more easily and naturally →



FOR EACH OF THE THREE SCENARIOS, RATE YOUR IMAGERY ABILITY IN SEVEN AREAS:

- A) HOW VIVIDLY you saw or visualised the image
- B) HOW CLEARLY you heard the sounds
- C) HOW VIVIDLY you felt your body movements
- D) HOW CLEARLY you were aware of your mood or felt your emotions of the situation
- E) WHETHER YOU COULD see the image from inside your body
- F) WHETHER YOU COULD see the image from outside your body
- G) HOW WELL you could control the image

After you have read each scenario, rate your imagery skills by going through questions a-g using the following scales:

4 = clear and vivid image  
5 = extremely clear and vivid image

**For items a-f:**

- 1 = no image present
- 2 = not clear or vivid, but a recognisable image
- 3 = moderately clear and vivid image

**For item g:**

- 1 = no control at all of image
- 2 = very hard to control
- 3 = moderate control of image
- 4 = good control of image
- 5 = complete control of image

Vealey and Greenleaf's imagery rating scale (2010).

SEE THE RESULTS!

| Directions                | Dimension            | Score |
|---------------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Sum of all <b>a</b> items | Visual               |       |
| Sum of all <b>b</b> items | Auditory             |       |
| Sum of all <b>c</b> items | Kinaesthetic         |       |
| Sum of all <b>d</b> items | Emotion              |       |
| Sum of all <b>e</b> items | Internal Perspective |       |
| Sum of all <b>f</b> items | External Perspective |       |
| Sum of all <b>g</b> items | Controllability      |       |

Interpret your scores in the visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, emotion and controllability categories based on the following scale: excellent (15-13), good (12-10), average (9-7), fair (6-5), poor (4-3). Notice the categories in which your scores were lower and practise to increase your imagery ability in these areas. All of these areas are important for imagery training, so don't just rely on your visual sense. Work to improve the others. Remember it takes practice, but you can increase your imagery ability and it could be worth it – evidence says imagery can make a difference to your performance. Good luck!

through your nose.  
● With each breath out say the word calm, or some other word or nonsense sound silently to yourself

**HAVE A GO AT EVALUATING YOUR IMAGERY ABILITY**

There are three types of imagery exercises you can do in order to evaluate how easy or difficult it is for you to bring images to your mind. These are:

- Developing vivid images; this is being able to sharpen images so you can see all the details in your head
- Controlling images; this is where you can keep control of the image in your head and learn to manipulate images by will
- Engaging in self-awareness; this is where you become more aware of thoughts and feelings that can influence your performance without you realising it

By assessing your ability in each of these three areas, you will better understand your unique imagery abilities and can then target areas that can be improved through practice.



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To evaluate your imagery ability read one of the swimming scenarios below. Imagine the situation by providing as much detail from your imagination as possible to make the image as real as you can.

**SCENARIO 1: Vividness**

Place yourself in your usual swimming environment. It is empty except for you. Stand in the middle of this place and look all around. Notice the quiet and emptiness. Pick out as many details as you can. What does it smell like? What are the colours, shapes and forms that you see? Now imagine yourself in the same setting, but this time there are many spectators there. Imagine yourself getting ready to perform. Try to experience this image from inside your body. See the spectators, your teammates, your coach and your opponents. Try to hear the sounds of the crowd, the teammates

chatter, your family or friends shouting encouragement, and the particular sounds associated with swimming. Re-create the feelings of nervous anticipation and excitement that you have before competing. How do you feel?

**SCENARIO 2: Controllability**

Choose a swimming skill (such as hand entry for front crawl). Begin practising this skill over and over. See and feel

**Michael Phelps** visualised his ideal swim before going to sleep every night before the London 2012 Olympic games. He imagined himself gliding and undulating through the water in real time, stroke by stroke, creating his rhythm for the perfect race.

yourself doing this from inside your body. If you make a mistake or perform it incorrectly, stop the image and repeat it, attempting to enter the water perfectly every time. Remember a time where you performed the skill well and then when you haven't performed it well. Take notice of what you are doing wrong and why you aren't performing the skill well. Now imagine yourself performing it correctly. Focus on how your body feels as you do it correctly.

**SCENARIO 3: Self-Awareness**

Think back to a swimming situation where you experienced a great deal of anxiety. Re-create that situation in your head, seeing and hearing yourself. Especially re-create the feeling of anxiety. Try to feel the physical responses of your body to the emotions and also try to recall the thoughts going through your mind that may have caused the anxiety. Now attempt to let go of the anxiety and relax your body. Breathe slowly and deeply and focus on your body as you exhale. Imagine all the tension being pulled out of your lungs and exhaled from your body. Continue breathing slowly and exhaling tension until you are deeply relaxed.

**NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE: STAYING MOTIVATED**

MOTIVATION IS THE FOUNDATION OF SPORT PERFORMANCE AND ACHIEVEMENT. THIS ARTICLE WILL FOCUS ON WHAT MOTIVATION IS, WHAT CAN AFFECT OUR MOTIVATION AND HOW WE CAN HELP TO INCREASE IT.