How can attention help players improve their sporting performance? It may seem obvious to say that a player who pays more attention to what they are doing on the playing field will produce a higher level of performance than a player paying less attention.

But how can a player consciously develop how they use their attention to help them gain a competitive edge? Coaches can play a crucial role in this process by helping their players understand how to develop and use their attention to improve key aspects of their performance.

This summary presents four attention-related strategies that have been prominent in attention-related research for many years. Each strategy is explained in a sporting context, including an example that aims to show coaches how these methods can be applied within their coaching.

The researchers used examples of traditional American sports (i.e., baseball and American football) in the original journal article. For this summary, the examples have been rewritten using sports more familiar to UK coaches.
The researchers explain attentional focus as the idea of players only focusing their attention on the sources of information that are critical to the skill they are carrying out. Previous research found players focus too much attention on negative thoughts, distractions and irrelevant information. Learning to ignore these and focus attention on only the most important information will help players achieve higher levels of performance.

Research suggests, in any sport, it is important for players to consider both internal and external sources of information. Internal sources can include specific movements and tactics to be carried out, while external sources can include objects such as a ball or the opposing team’s tactics.

Coaches can help players focus their attention on the most important sources of information at specific times, thus helping them to perform as effectively as possible.

Example - A goalkeeper practising penalties

Firstly, the coach simplifies the task by helping the goalkeeper decide the most important internal and external information to focus on during the penalty kick. As the ball is placed on the spot, the coach may instruct the goalkeeper to focus their attention on their position on the goal line (internal information) and the run-up of the penalty taker (external information).

The coach will then help the goalkeeper focus their attention on the information that is most important during the next phase of play – as the penalty kick is taken. This could include the direction of their dive (internal information) or the ball as it is kicked (external information).

When observing the task, the coach may identify errors in the goalkeeper’s performance and choose to focus more attention on these in subsequent practice. For example, if the goalkeeper paid too much attention to the opponent’s run-up and this resulted in an incorrect position on the goal line, the coach could instruct the player to focus more attention on this element of their game.

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Attention can have positive and negative impacts on sporting performance.
- Coaches can use attention-related strategies to help their players focus their attention more wisely, on the most important information at the most important times.
- These attention-related strategies can help players perfect their skills and techniques while preparing them to perform in a game situation.
- Coaches in any sport can analyse these techniques and apply the principles to their coaching.
The researchers describe self-talk as words, phrases or cues that players understand as instructions or actions. Research has found it can have a positive impact on both elite players and beginners, helping them to focus their attention before, during and after carrying out a specific skill.

The researchers give the example of ‘push, point, hit’ as a verbal self-talk cue that helps tennis players to practise their serve. By reciting the words during the serve, players know what they need to do and when. ‘Push’ instructs the player to release the ball into the air, ‘point’ encourages them to point at the ball and fully extend their arm, while ‘hit’ is said at the point of contact to ensure the player keeps their eye on the ball at the crucial moment.

Example – Designing self-talk cues in golf

Coaches can help their players by designing cues that relate specifically to a skill or technique. The first step is to identify the different components that the player will perform.

The coach could identify four components of a golf swing – addressing the ball, ensuring a full backswing, maintaining the correct position through impact and following through efficiently. The coach could then simplify the technique by giving each component a single cue word – ‘address’, ‘backswing’, ‘impact’ and ‘follow-through’.

The coach would explain to the player what each cue word involves and where to focus their attention. For example, ‘address’ could include teeing the ball and positioning the feet and body correctly before starting the backswing. 'Backswing' could include the takeaway, moving the hips and body, keeping the head still and bringing the club head down towards the ball on the correct plane.

Stimulation

Referral to as ‘arousal’ by the researchers, this refers to how players’ sporting performance can be affected as a result of how stimulated they are.

Players become stimulated by their perception of the situation they are playing in. However, as individuals, all players will be affected differently by these situations, so it is vital for coaches to understand the level that produces their players’ most effective performance.

In a game situation, players are stimulated psychologically (becoming excited or nervous) and physiologically (developing a slow or fast heart rate). Research suggests anxious players may be unaware of important information they should be paying attention to, while excitement can lead players to narrow their focus and miss important information.

Example – A wheelchair basketball team practising defensive plays

Coaches can determine the level of stimulation that produces their players’ best performance by reproducing some of the situations they will come across during a game. This can include helping players effectively deal with loud and distracting noises.

A crowd, teammates and opponents are all sources of loud and potentially distracting noises. Players can find it difficult to pay attention to what is important if they are unnerved or distracted. Coaches therefore need to ensure their players do not become overwhelmed by noisy situations, but instead learn to embrace them.

To do this, a wheelchair basketball coach can play the sound of a noisy crowd through speakers when the team is practising defensive plays. The coach can then monitor the players’ chair and ball control and their ability to communicate and carry out the plays in the noisy situation.

If some players appear more focused, the coach may decide these are the players to run the plays in a game situation.

If other players are distracted and confused, the coach can find ways to simplify the plays by changing communication signals or breaking the play down into smaller segments to help these players handle their increasing stimulation.
This summary is based on the article below, which you can read if you are interested in finding out more about this area:


Other more general reading includes:

