

## Benefits of Visualization Training

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Muhammad Ali, Tiger Woods, and Katie Ledecky are a few of the most highly decorated and successful athletes of all time. Fans, competitors, and aspiring athletes strive to understand what these professionals do physically to climb their way to the top. What many people do not realize is that it is not merely physical training that determines how many medals are won. But there is a specific psychological component that cannot be overlooked when studying these elite athletes. For a near-flawless routine, a certain degree of precision is required for each sport. Therefore, they must be in the right headspace to do what they do best. The key that these professional athletes utilize for a sharp performance is called visualization training. Also called imagery, visualization is a technique that many accomplished individuals use to prepare their minds and bodies for all-around success. It is the act of creating certain scenarios in one's mind that can improve real life performance, including athletic ability, confidence and motivation, and reduces performance anxiety.

Visualization is a powerful tool that has been practiced for centuries, not only by professional athletes, but successful entrepreneurs, politicians, actors, and lawyers. All of whom have very specific and high-pressure roles. Our minds and bodies are connected and intertwine seamlessly, which is what makes imagery possible and effective. By visualizing what is desired, our bodies attempt to recreate that same picture when it comes time to perform. Mentally creating the scene gives athletes a different perspective on their performance. It can be beneficial to see themselves from an outsider's point of view so they can adjust details based upon any number of possibilities. "Visualization sends a message to your brain about what's important. Those filters will then make sure that anything important to your vision does not go unnoticed" (LaBorde, 2021). When an athlete imagines an ideal performance in their mind, the brain captures and remembers that specific routine. By picturing a successful scene including many details and a positive result, athletes are much more inclined to physically perform how they would like and take home a victory. This can be used to a person's advantage by picturing success and making it more realistically achievable.

Athletes can and should visualize not only what their routine will look like, but also how it will feel. By connecting all senses to the visualization, they can get an idea of what success will look, sound, and feel like. No matter what the sport, athletes can close their eyes and imagine exactly how they will compete and how it will feel in that exact moment. This acts like physical practice without having to move a muscle. Many professionals not only imagine the actual performance but also the feeling after they win. When mentally creating the feeling of a successful routine, it makes the athlete feel more comfortable and prepared when the time comes to perform. They will also be ready for the feeling of success and will not be afraid to achieve their larger goals. "I have my goals and I visualize things to help me achieve those goals...I know what my stroke should feel like at different parts of the race, and I can just kind of picture that in

my mind” - Katie Ledecky (Rovello, 2016). By recreating the entire feeling and activating multiple senses, an athlete’s mind and body will be ready to endure the sensation that comes with performing and winning. This also helps them to know what their routine should feel like, so they can make changes on the spot when corrections may be needed. Knowing when to adjust and having quick reflexes is a vital skill in any sport. Imagining different scenarios can help them know what to do when obstacles present themselves during competition. Visualization training helps athletes practice pivoting to other options when necessary and perform a more precise routine with minimal errors.

Not only does visualization training improve physical abilities, but it also boosts athletes’ confidence and motivation. By mentally practicing what will and could happen during a game, match, or competition, athletes can prepare for multiple outcomes and challenges. Imagining a win can improve confidence and make an athlete feel more capable of achieving their goals, no matter how big. When athletes get a taste of winning, even an imaginary triumph, it is hard to keep them from reaching their goals. Being able to control the scene in their mind makes it easier to gain confidence during the actual performance, since during visualization, the athlete is in complete control of their body, mind, and surroundings. Mary Lou Retton, an Olympic gymnast, visualizes herself competing perfectly in each event. Then she imagines herself on the winning podium and what it would feel like to take home gold (LaBorde, 2021). When athletes can imagine themselves being victorious, their motivation to bring that success to fruition becomes nearly unshakeable. The more confident and motivated an athlete becomes, the more dangerous and intimidating they will be as competition to others.

When you’re imagining your success, you’re teaching your brain how to respond to a situation. Whether it’s a competition or simply practiced game play, recreating exceptional performances will help you to feel confident and prepared for your next big match. (Rollins, 2021)

When visualizing a victory, our brains learn and remember what it feels like to win. Practicing mental imagery on a regular basis can result in major success for athletes and can increase their self-confidence. One of the greatest examples of confidence in sports history is Muhammad Ali. The boxing legend often practiced imagery and added every detail he could think of, including the smell of his own sweat. He was also a big believer in positive affirmations (the practice of repeating “I am” statements). The most famous affirmation he would tell himself was, “I am the greatest.” Ali is a prime example of an athlete using visualization training to boost confidence and motivation. This made him the boxer and person he was. Mental imagery can reform an athlete’s mindset and transform their performance from good to great.

While boosting confidence is critical to having a healthy, strong mindset, another paramount aspect for every athlete is the ability to reduce stress and anxiety that comes from performing. An athlete’s responsibility to perform comes with a substantial amount of stress and pressure, which can come from internal as well as external forces. Anxiety about performing well, getting injured, and satisfying themselves, coaches, and supporters can be quite a heavy weight on one person’s shoulders. This can be overwhelming and distracting, which can lead to diminished outcomes. Strengthening the mind is a process that is crucial for all athletes to handle

stress and still perform at a high level. Visualization training can help athletes overcome this stress and anxiety by running them through practice routines and making them comfortable in the actual situations that come with performing. When athletes imagine themselves before, during, and after performing, they are better qualified to complete the task at hand with greater ease and less anxiety. The more comfortable and at peace an athlete is during all stages of their routine, the more they can focus on their goal instead of on the stressful environment. To prevent this stress from taking over when the pressure is on, athletes can imagine the scene multiple times to prime themselves for the feeling of physically performing and the outcome afterward. Another stressor is the fear of making errors. Imagery training reduces this stress by showing athletes their routine from a spectator's viewpoint. When they can see exactly what they will be doing with clarity and control, it can help calm the nerves that come with the anticipation of mistakes. Billie Jean King, the victor in one of the most well-known tennis matches in history, utilizes visualization so she knows exactly what to expect if the game does not go her way. "To prepare for a game she first imagined everything that could go wrong during a match. Then she visualized how she would react to the unexpected and handle what was beyond her control" (LaBorde, 2021). King had no need to feel nervous since she had prepared for errors to be made. By practicing imagery, she already knew what to do if her opponent gained an advantage. Planning for conflict and setbacks is what makes good athletes great and helps them stand out from the competition. Being faced with a problem and finding a way to overcome it is what sports are all about. Having a champion's mindset helps athletes hurdle over any obstacle that comes their way and helps them to reach success and realize their full potential.

The practice of visualization training positively affects an athlete's mindset and physical skills, leading to overall improvements. Visualizing helps athletes internally prove to themselves that they can achieve their goals. Imagery training is what makes many great athletes great. So, when it comes to reaching success, imagine yourself achieving it and remember the legendary words of Muhammad Ali, "I am the greatest."

## References

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