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### Today's Topic

Welcome back to the Coach's Corner!

I'll be the first person to admit that I struggle to focus pretty often. I have a real 'wanderer' of a mind and that can make things difficult for me. Whether it's trying to get myself to sit down and finish writing this newsletter or getting myself to actually pay attention while reading a book, my mind doesn't always want to follow along. And that's what brings me to this week's topic: **FOCUS**.

Focus, or the ability to focus, can be a weird concept to talk about because in most settings, it isn't something we really think about. We expect our minds to focus on what we choose and follow along without ever getting caught up. Sadly, this isn't always the case.

There can be tons of different reasons you or one of your athletes is struggling to focus at practice or in a game. Even if we aren't able to 'fix' the reason someone is struggling to focus, we can use different tools and strategies to help get their mind back on track as quickly as possible.

The ability to focus is truly a skill that can be taught, learned, and improved upon. This week's newsletter has the goal of educating you a little bit more about what **Focusing** really is, why it is so important to performance, and how we can improve our athletes' ability to focus.

So why is it so important to be able to focus properly?

Can you expect someone to perform their best if they aren't really paying attention? **Obviously not.**

So if we want the best performances from our athletes, it all starts with having their best focus. Not only getting their focus on the task to begin with, but also getting them back on track when things go wrong and their focus starts to shift and change throughout the duration of a game.

Focusing properly typically leads to better performances, but it's not magic. There is a reason for that.

When athletes possess a high level of focus during a competition, and are 'locked-in' or 'in the zone' it changes the way their mind operates. Being fully focused allows athletes to:

- Think more clearly
- Make better and quicker decisions
- Reduce anxiety

-Improve confidence

The better we can get our athletes to focus, the better they are able to think, and therefore the better they are able to perform. No, it isn't as cut and dry as that, there is a lot of neuroscience that goes into it, but at the end of the day we know that improved focus leads to better performance and that is all that matters.

If we can provide our athletes with the tools and skills to get 'into the zone' we are setting them up for the best chances of success for both themselves and the team as a whole. When they are 'in their zone' it is a lot more difficult for things to throw them off and negatively impact their performance.

So, how do I teach my athletes how to focus better and get into their zone every single game?

### **How Can I Apply This?**

Teaching and learning how to focus better isn't a one-size-fits-all thing. It is important to understand that every single one of your athletes will respond differently and just because a technique worked with one person, doesn't mean it will work for everyone.

There are many different techniques to teach focus out there, so there is likely something to fit every athlete you encounter. I want to provide you with a few of my favorite techniques for improving focus.

I picked this list of techniques because they're what I have found to be the most effective, easiest to grasp, and the best for sustained, long-term improved focus.

#### **1. Controlling the Controllables**

This is a saying that I heard from many different coaches throughout my playing career, but I never really understood it

until I started learning more about the science behind focus and sport psychology as a whole.

When we talk about 'controlling what we can control' the goal is to prevent the outside factors of a game from impacting the way our athletes behave and perform. If we can get our athletes to focus on their process and the goal of the team completely, nothing else that happens on the outside can effect them.

What are some of our Controllables?

- Our Effort
- Our Attitude
- Our Decision Making
- Executing Our Job
- Being a Good Teammate

What are some of our Uncontrollables?

- The Officials
- The Other Team
- The Crowd
- The Environment
- Our Teammates Decisions

This is just a short list of some of the controllables and uncontrollables that our athletes face every single competition.

If our athletes are spending the entire competition focused on the poor call an official made for example, they are unable to really control their own effort, attitude, decision making, etc. because they are too worried about what will happen when the official makes another bad call.

By teaching them the importance of focusing on their controllables, we are allowing them to put their full focus and

effort toward the things they can do to positively impact the game and their performance.

Focusing on controlling what you can control is always one of the first topics I teach when talking about focus.

## 2. **Breathing**

This one may seem a little strange at first, but as we've talked in past newsletters, breathing is an extremely powerful tool for athletes. This doesn't have to be in-depth breath work, it can be as simple as a few deep breaths down into the stomach.

When athletes are using their breathing properly, they are providing their body and brain with ample amounts of oxygen allowing them to think as clearly as possible and fuel their muscles to perform at peak levels.

I teach everyone to take a few really deep belly breaths anytime they are feeling a little nervous, unsure, anxious, or they can feel that their mind is wandering a little bit.

A few deep breaths can really help to 'reset' someone and pull their focus back to where we want it when something isn't going right.

Most sports are very up-tempo and fast paced, but there is almost always a stoppage at some point that allows our athletes to stop themselves, take a few deep breaths, and refocus on the task at hand.

Thinking about breathing as a tool to improve focus is a little odd because our breathing is an unconscious task that our bodies do without even thinking about it. But as soon as we make a conscious effort to take these deep breaths we are taking control of our focus- choosing to focus on our breathing- and allowing us to choose where we place our focus next.

## 3. **Creating a Mental Zone**

If you've seen the movie 'Happy Gilmore' you might remember the scene where Chubbs is teaching Happy how to putt. He tells him

to think of a 'happy place' to go to in order to relax and hit the putt the way he needs to. Now, that movie takes some creative liberties at this point and really goes off the deep end describing Happy's 'happy place', but the lesson is actually pretty sound.

By creating a little 'zone' in our heads that is stress-free, it allows us to focus and think clearly. We are creating a way for our minds to control our focus and prevent outside factors from impacting the way we think.

Creating a 'mental zone' for your athletes can be pretty complex because, as I said earlier, everyone is different and will see these tools uniquely. But if we can explain this idea to our athletes and help them understand the importance of it, they can usually start to develop this Zone for themselves.

Many people I've talked to describe their mental zone as an empty room with a window and door, or their bedroom or house. Oftentimes it is a place that reminds them of something stress-free and happy, there is no right answer here. The key is creating a zone that makes sense to you and allows you to think clearly no matter what is going on 'outside'.

For me, my mental zone is a snowy mountain scene with no one else around. When I see this open expanse of snow, trees, etc. in my mind, I am able to think clearly and I seem to forget about everything else that is going on around me. Allowing me the ability to choose where I place my focus.

Out of this list, this is definitely the most in-depth technique that will probably take the longest to master, but it's also one of the most effective when it comes to learning how to focus more effectively.

If this is something you have tried before but can't seem to get it to 'click' don't worry, it takes some time and repetition to get it to stick. This is a process that takes some people years to get the hang of, so don't get discouraged. If you would like some more specific, in-depth advice feel free to reach out to me. I would love to help!

#### 4. Screaming 'FOCUS' is a Waste of Time

Coming from a baseball background, this is something I have seen more times that I figured I ever would have. Countless times I've seen coaches take this approach, especially toward their pitchers.

Example: A kid is on the mound pitching and he is struggling. He can't seem to find the zone and is throwing a lot of balls. The coach from the dugout will scream "**FOCUS!!!**" "**THROW STRIKES!!!**"

Believe it or not, this doesn't work!

By yelling at his athletes to 'focus' he isn't helping the athlete calm down, reset, and ignore the outside factors. Instead, he is adding to those outside factors, increasing stress, and making it even tougher for his player to lock-in. It's not like the kid is out there trying to throw balls, he is just struggling at the moment.

So, instead of yelling at him and raising the tension of the situation, it is much more effective to try to slow the situation down, help him calm his mind through breathing and resetting, and allowing him to place his full focus back on his job, which is throwing competitive pitches and getting outs.

Regardless of sport, yelling 'FOCUS' at your athletes is not going to help them focus and perform better. If anything, it is just going to make the situation worse and make it more difficult to fix.

This one is less of a technique and more of something to avoid.

In the heat of competition, it is easy to get worked up and look for the immediate fix. But oftentimes, that immediate fix isn't a fix at all.

The ability to focus effectively is so important for athletes. And the higher the level, the more important it becomes. Competitions or games can be absolute roller-coasters filled with extreme highs accompanied by devastating lows. Our goal with developing the ability to focus is to minimize the extremes

of those highs and lows. We want to create an environment for our athletes that is much more even-keeled and steady. It is still good to celebrate successes and the lows are often unavoidable, but we don't want those times to completely define our mentality and ability to focus. The more level-headed we can keep our athletes, the better they are able to focus and perform the way we know they can.

The ability to focus is often the differentiating factor between good athletes and great ones.

## **This Week in Sports**

### **1. Minor League Baseball Plans for Huge Improvements**

This past week, the MLB announced their plans to provide housing for all minor league baseball players by 2022. If you aren't too familiar with the minor league baseball system, it can be hard to comprehend how big of a deal this actually is.

As of 2021, after a massive salary increase league-wide in 2020, most minor league players still make less than \$15,000 per year, and that is only paid during the season. This means that most players are also working part-time jobs on top of chasing their dreams just to make ends meet.

In the past, the MLB has made 0 effort to provide housing for their players. This includes requiring players to find housing in their home cities, as well as pay for their hotel rooms on away trips.

When these guys are making 10-15K per season, it is unfathomable for them to afford their bare necessities on top of the housing costs they need to pay in order to survive. Forcing some players to sleep in their cars or pile 10 guys into single bedroom apartments.



While the MLB hasn't determined exactly how they will execute this new 'housing program' for their minor league players, they have discussed either providing housing for every organization, or providing the players with additional housing stipends on top of the salaries they are receiving already.

We are going to have to wait another year to see how this will all play out, but I am a huge proponent of anyone chasing their dreams and I don't think they should be forced to live below the poverty line just to sustain the hopes of making the big leagues, while the MLB (a multi-billion dollar corporation) sits idly by doing nothing to help.

[Read the full article HERE.](#)

## **2. My New Favorite Rabbit-Hole: Umpire Scorecards**

Throughout this MLB Season the company, 'Umpire Scorecards' has blown up on the internet. Essentially, they grade MLB umpires on their performances each and every game they call. They grade umpires on their overall ball-strike accuracy, their worst missed calls, and the impact these calls have on the game in terms of runs scored.

It seems like a pretty complex system, and I'm glad that there's smarter individuals than I out there doing this work because I find it extremely interesting.

'Umpire Scorecards' was thrust even further into the spotlight after Tuesday night's ALCS Game 4 between the Boston Red Sox and the Houston Astros. The Homeplate umpire for this game was Laz Diaz, and boy did he have a rough night.

Watching the game, it became pretty evident that his strike zone was questionable to say the least, with multiple bad calls riling up both teams throughout the contest. But it became even clearer when 'Umpire Scorecards' released his rating on Wednesday morning.

Diaz had an 88% accuracy rating during Game 4 on balls and strikes, the lowest he had all season. With the league average being around 95%, his performance on Tuesday night was pretty poor. It was also probably the worst time to have a poor performance, in the heart of a great post season series between two very popular teams.

It hurts to see the official of a high leverage game play such a large role in it's potential outcome, but I'm glad to see companies like 'Umpire Scorecards' holding these people accountable and creating a standard for the entire MLB to strive for.

Maybe I'm weird, but I look forward to these ratings every morning after I watch a baseball game. The easiest way to access this info is through their Twitter page [@UmpScorecards](#) or their website [www.umpscorecards.com](http://www.umpscorecards.com)

## **Other Sport Psych Resources**

### **1. Lane Johnson Speaks Out On His Mental Health**

This week Lane Johnson, All-Pro Tackle for the Philadelphia Eagles, announced that he will be returning to the team after a 3-week break he took from football to address his own mental health struggles.

Johnson announced on Twitter that he had been battling depression and anxiety for a long time and had been keeping it bottled up until it became too much and he was forced to step away from football to take care of it.

It is never good to see someone struggle with their mental health to a point where it impacts their profession, but it is good to see prominent figures in the world of sports speak out on the importance of mental health and become beacons of hope for so many other athletes out there who may be suffering in silence.

I wish Lane the best of luck in his return to the NFL and it seems that his teammates and coaches in Philly are in full support of him and look forward to his return to their offensive line.

[Check out the full article HERE.](#)

## 2. [Habits of a Mentally Tough Athlete](#)

Dr. Patrick Cohn, Mental Performance Coach out of Florida, shared a post last week on Instagram that did a great job of summarizing some of the traits we often see in very mentally tough athletes.

Like I often say, not every athlete is the same, so just because you don't see one of these in your athletes it doesn't mean they're a lost cause or anything. But this list can be helpful in being a list of traits that you want to instill in your athletes through your coaching.

The list gives 5 Habits of Mentally Tough Athletes:

- They grind through challenging times
- They work on their mental game daily
- They focus on solutions, not problems
- They have unshakeable self-belief
- They are mentally prepared for big moments

As a coach, if you can strive to instill these habits and traits in your athletes, you are setting them up for as much success as possible. You are giving them the tools necessary for them to become the best versions of themselves both on and off the field.

[See the original post HERE.](#)

## Quick Quote



"Something I learned early is to not worry about what I can't control... But what I can control is my attitude, my effort, and my focus every single day."

**-Tim Tebow**

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Thank you for reading and until next week, remember:

***Today is a great day to change a life!***

Cheers,

Bryce Strecker M.S.

Applied Sport Psychologist | Mental Skills Coach

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