

One of my favorite questions I ask of the athletes for whom I am mental coach is can you see yourself standing on the center podium to receive the gold medal at the Olympic Games. Surprisingly the answer is often no.

Another question that gets a surprising answer is who is your biggest competition? The answer is frequently the name of another athlete who competes in the same event.

Sports of all varieties are predominantly mental exercises. More and more one hears that such and such an elite athlete has hired a sports psychologist to help improve performance.

An experiment that has been performed in many universities is the one in which the team, often a basketball team, is divided into three equal groups. The first group is told to do absolutely nothing connected with their sport. They are told to stay off the court. The second group is instructed to physically practice throwing hoops for an hour per day. The third group is instructed to spend an hour each day imagining themselves throwing hoops. At the end of the allotted time all three teams were assessed for improvements in sinking hoops. The results in all cases were the same. Those told to stay off the court showed no improvement, or even a poorer performance, those who practiced physically improved by approximately 25% and those who just imagined throwing hoops had improved by 23%.

This suggests that sports and athletic training is as much a mental activity as it is a physical activity. Athletes who pay as much mental attention to their sports activity as they do in physically preparing for that activity invariably perform better. Golfers who see the ball landing exactly where they want it to be and who are totally focused on that result are much more likely to put the ball exactly where they imagined it to go.

Experiments in which the subjects are exposed to an event, then asked to describe the event and who are then put into a hypnotic trance and again asked to describe the event produce a richer description of the event than when in their normal waking state. This suggests that their senses are more aware of the details than they can reproduce consciously, but their unconscious mind seems to have access to much more information that is usable. A golfer who has been taught to enter a self-induced hypnotic trance will be aware of much more information such as wind direction and force, the lie of the green, and where on the club the sweet spot is located.

This same method of enhancement of performance is applicable to many different sports and athletic activities, and is the obvious reason why elite and professional athletes hire sports psychologists and sports hypnotherapists to improve their game.