

# IMAGERY

Sylvie Bernier, Gold Medallist Diver at the 1994 Olympics, on the topic of imagery:

*I did my dives in my head all the time. At night, before going to sleep, I always did my dives. Ten dives. I started with a front dive, the first one that I had to do at the Olympics, and I did everything as if I was actually there. I saw myself on the board with the same bathing suit. Everything was the same. I saw myself in the pool at the Olympics doing my dives. If the dive was wrong, I went back and started over again. It takes a good hour to do perfect imagery of all my dives but for me it was better than a workout. I felt like I was on the board. Sometimes I would take the weekend off and do imagery five times a day.*

*It took me a long time to control my images and perfect my imagery, maybe a year, doing it every day. At first I couldn't see myself, I always saw everyone else, or I would see my dives wrong all the time. As I continued to work at it, I got to the point where I could see myself doing a perfect dive and the crowd yelling at the Olympics.*

## a) Imagery

Imagery is the ability to see, feel, hear, smell and taste in your mind. It is a powerful skill that can make a significant difference in your performance because it can positively influence your thoughts, emotions and actions.

Most of us have the ability to create images that are as real to us as those captured by our eyes. In fact, our brain cannot tell the difference between an actual image and one fabricated in our mind. For this reason, imagery can be used to recall past performances and create blueprints for future ones.

Can you create images in your mind? If so, how clear are they? How often are they related to your water polo performances? Complete the following exercise to find out more about your ability to do mental imagery.

### EXERCISE 12.1 - MY IMAGERY SKILLS

The following exercise will give you a good idea about the senses and actions you are able to incorporate in your imagery. **Imagine a ball.** Circle the number that best represents your ability to do the following:

	Not at all Perfectly					Somewhat
<b>See it.</b>						
<input type="checkbox"/> Can you see all of it?	1	2	3	4	5	
<input type="checkbox"/> Can you see parts of it?						
<input type="checkbox"/> Can you see the seams on it?	1	2	3	4	5	
<input type="checkbox"/> Can you see its colour(s)?	1	2	3	4	5	

**EXERCISE 12.1 - MY IMAGERY SKILLS (cont)****Feel it.**

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you feel its texture?                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you feel the indents where the seams are? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you feel water on it?                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**Hear it.**

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you hear the noise it makes when you bounce it on the ground? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you hear it smack against a wall?                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you hear it fall in a puddle of water?                        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**Smell it.**

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you smell its texture?                   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you smell it at the bottom of a gym bag? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**Taste it.**

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you taste its texture?                                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you taste the salt on it after playing with it in the ocean? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**Control it.**

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you shift it from one hand to another? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you spin it in one hand?               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you catch it with your one hand?       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Can you shoot it in a net?                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

How many senses and actions were you able to incorporate in your imagery? How clear were your images? Did you get many 5's? Do you feel you can improve in certain areas? Remember that the ultimate goal is to be able to 1) create or recreate **vivid** images, and 2) **control** these images so you can quickly shift from one to another and put them in motion (*see mental practice below*). If you had difficulty doing this, don't worry, it takes **a lot** of practice to develop and perfect this skill. But the fruits you will reap in the long-term are really sweet.

**There are two types of imagery you can do: internal and external.**

**External** imagery is when you view yourself from the perspective of an external observer, as if you are watching yourself on a videotape.

**Internal** imagery is when you imagine yourself from your own perspective, inside your own body, as if you had a camera on your head. You experience sensations like you would experience them in a real life situation.

Depending on your sport, both external and internal imagery can be useful. Many athletes prefer doing internal imagery because it's the next best thing to being there in the moment, physically, mentally, and emotionally going through a practice or a game. The kinesthetic feelings experienced during this type of imagery are powerful, and can be memorized and recalled in important future athletic situations. On the other hand, if you are learning or refining a particular skill, it can be helpful to use external imagery to detect, analyze and correct errors, just like you would do when you revise game videos with your coaches and teammates. Note that it is also possible for you to feel movement using this perspective, although it has been argued that sensations are more authentic when using internal imagery. You be the judge of that.

It is very normal if you can only do external imagery at first. Try to gradually incorporate internal imagery by shifting from one perspective to the other. In other words, try jumping in and out of your body. If you can only see yourself from outside your body, try to get closer to it each time you do imagery. Eventually you'll be right beside or behind your body and the time will come when you will naturally "walk into it."

## b) Mental Practice

Mental practice is an extension of your imagery, thus it can also help your performance significantly. When you are mentally practicing your sport, you are putting your mental images into *action* to rehearse skills, plays and even segments of a game in your mind, using as many sensations as possible. Note that you can limit the senses you want to incorporate. For example, you can imagine or think about an action by talking yourself through the steps, without necessarily visualizing or "feeling" it. It is probably more effective though if you try to include as many senses as possible because this will make your experience more authentic. Remember that you can mentally practice your sport using an internal or an external perspective.

*Mentally practice your sport on a regular basis. Use both internal and external perspectives to determine*

**TABLE 12.1 - GUIDELINES TO CONSIDER WHEN ENGAGING IN MENTAL PRACTICE**

**As you engage in mental practice, consider the following tips:**

1. Know the technical and motor aspects of the skill or play you want to practice (i.e., lateral jumping technique).
2. Take a few breaths to relax and focus before you mentally practice the skill or play. It might help to do active or passive progressive relaxation (see *Section 8*) to decrease your level of intensity and to get yourself into the right mindset.
3. Mentally practice the skill or play using both external and internal perspectives. Try to really integrate the "feeling of performing."

**TABLE 12.1 - GUIDELINES TO CONSIDER WHEN ENGAGING IN MENTAL PRACTICE**  
*(cont)*

4. Practice as if you were actually in the moment, going through the motions. Include as many cues as you can from the real setting, for example, the water, ball, net, shot clock, your teammates and opponents, coaches on the bench, referees, etc. Remember to include task-relevant cues.
5. Control the speed of your mental practice. If you find it difficult at first, break your skill or play down into small segments and rehearse them in slow-motion. Eventually do the entire skill or play at its normal speed.
6. Do your imagery successfully every time. If errors occur, stop, and try again until you get it right. Rehearsing a task with a negative outcome can cause more harm than good so be persistent, do it correctly.
7. Be positive, feel positive. Mentally practice congratulating yourself, and being congratulated by your teammates, coaches, and fans when you are successful. Include positive and confidence-enhancing images, emotions, and self-talk.
8. Create conditions to simulate performing the skill or play under stressful or pressure situations. See yourself successfully executing it under any circumstance.
9. Physically practice the skill or play as soon as possible after you have mentally rehearsed it. It might feel like a "déjà vu," like you have already been there and experienced it. Set a goal to mentally and then physically rehearse a particular skill during your next practice (i.e., in between drills, while rotating with other goalies).

*To see is to believe. Make  
your performance believable.*

**EXERCISE 12.2 - MENTALLY PRACTICING A SKILL**

Take a few minutes to mentally practice a particular skill (ex. blocking shots in the net, as players are lined up in front you and shooting at you from all angles). Refer to the guidelines in Table 12.1 and try to include as many sensations as possible.

To what extent were you able to follow:

**Guideline:**

**Comments:**

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

Imagery and mental practice go hand in hand with several other skills presented in this workbook, such as relaxation, focusing, refocusing, activation and positive self-talk. When you engage in mental practice, you indeed refine those skills as well.

There are several reasons why you should become an expert in imagery and mental practice. Table 12.2 outlines several of them.

**TABLE 12.2 - REASONS FOR ENGAGING IN IMAGERY AND MENTAL PRACTICE**

**You can use imagery / mental practice to:**

- Enhance your sport specific skills. This is particularly relevant when you are sick or injured and you cannot train on the field or court for example. You can maintain your skills by doing imagery several times a day at home or even while sitting in the bleachers watching practice.
- Detect, analyze, and correct errors in your performance. You can recall previous performances, target physical and mental errors as well as their causes (i.e., bad decisions) and then mentally practice rehearsing your performance correctly.
- Plan and simulate performance or competition strategies. Tactics and drills are important in most sports and you might be expected to be able to stick to your competition plan whether the competition is tight or not. In addition to your on-site technical and tactical training, you can plan and mentally rehearse drills at home, on the way to a competition, during your warm-up, during time-outs and also when you're sitting on the bench. You can also imagine yourself performing tactics under the most demanding and stressful situations (i.e., pouring rain, losing 10-1, sprained your thumb, best player on the team kicked out because of a brutality penalty, coach kicked out of the game, opponents playing extremely dirty, refs making calls against you, 10,000 fans in the stands, illness or death of a family member, must win the game by five goals to play in finals). Mental practice is an advantage here because often you don't get the chance to practice under these conditions in training.
- Solve problems. You can mentally rehearse successfully dealing with personal or sport-related problems. Plan for strategies to change bad habits or to deal with financial concerns, an inflexible boss at work, catching up with your homework, moving to a new location to train, states of anxiety or depression due to poor performances, nutritional concerns, chronic pain, inability to train due to an injury, lack of communication with your coach, lack of motivation or activation, team cohesion problems. Mentally practice executing your plan and adequately solving your problem.
- Set goals. Before actually putting them down on paper, visualize your goals and your future. Rehearse the steps you will have to take to achieve your long-term goals. Anticipate potential obstacles and see yourself successfully overcoming them.
- Build your self-confidence. One of the greatest goals of mental practice is to prepare yourself to feel ready and confident to perform and deal with distractions during competitions. Imagining flawless and controlled performances can bring about feelings of satisfaction and certainty about your abilities to play your sport.

**TABLE 12.2 - REASONS FOR ENGAGING IN IMAGERY AND MENTAL PRACTICE (cont)**

- Improve your focus. When you're engaging in mental practice, you are in fact using and refining your broad-internal and narrow-internal focus. You can practice using and shifting between all attentional styles, for example, by imagining yourself scanning players around you (broad-external) and then shooting the ball in the net (narrow-external). Use mental practice to improve your abilities to focus and refocus on task-relevant cues.
- Control your emotions. You can mentally rehearse your emotional responses to practice or competition situations. If you know that you have a tendency to get angry, frustrated, sad, scared, threatened, or disgusted in certain circumstances, relive your emotions in your mind and see yourself getting them under control and channeling the energy in positive ways.
- Cope with pain and illnesses. Mental practice is a powerful technique that can help you deal with physical pain or discomfort arising from an injury or illness. Through mental practice, you can reduce or eliminate pain and symptoms, as well as enhance the effects of medication or any type of treatment you are receiving.

The following exercises will help you refine your imagery and mental practice skills, and accomplish different objectives that were mentioned in *Table 12.2*, including the last one. All athletes at one point or another experience injuries and have to decrease or stop physical training. **There is always a psychological aspect to an injury and you have control over it.** You can increase the quality and speed of your recovery through mental practice. Remember, don't underestimate the power of your mind. Learn to control it rather than letting it control you!

**EXERCISE 12.3 - VIDEOTAPE MODELING**

Watch yourself on a videotape. Carefully observe great performances of certain skills and plays. Recall the thoughts and feelings you had at the time and try to relive them in your mind. Go through the performance exactly like you did on the video. If it helps, play the video on slow motion at first to really capture every detail and relevant cue. Watch one play or one skill segment, pause the tape, and then rehearse it mentally. When you're satisfied, play another segment and go through the same steps. If you get to a segment or play you had difficulty performing, stop the tape, assess what you did wrong and what you must do to correct it. Rehearse it in your mind until you get it right. Go back and forth to the tape if you need to. Videotape modeling might make it easier for you in the beginning if you are having difficulty getting a clear picture of your actions or putting them into motion. Remember, if you can only get snapshot pictures in your mind, gradually link them together (shift quickly from one to another) and eventually rehearse them in a fluid and controlled fashion. If you don't have a videotape of yourself, you can watch an athlete who suits your style of play, and try to replicate some of his or her performances in your mind.

**Lessons:**

**Highlights:**

**EXERCISE 12.4 - SPECIAL FRIENDS**

Find a comfortable place, close your eyes and imagine that two of your closest friends are sitting in a chair in front of you. Look at them from head to toe and capture as many details as you can about them (i.e., face, hair, skin colour, jewelry, clothes, mannerisms, voice, shape). As they talk to you, hear their voice, notice their facial expressions and the words they like to use. As they get up and approach you, notice how they walk and how good they look. Feel their warm hug, smell their body fragrance, and be thankful that they are part of your life. Tell them how special they are.

**Lessons:**

**Highlights:**

**EXERCISE 12.5 - THE COMPETITION VENUE**

Imagine yourself at a competition site. There is no one there but you. Notice how quiet and peaceful it is. Smell and feel the air on your body. Use all your senses to capture every detail of your "home away from home." Walk around feeling confident and ready. Get your equipment ready and start moving to get a good feel of what you are about to perform. Clear your thoughts. Now imagine yourself in the same setting, but this time, the venue is packed. You are getting ready for the biggest competition of your life. You feel great! Everyone who is important to you is there. Your coach is supportive and if you are part of a team, it could not be more united. See the spectators in the stands, hear them cheer you on. Take a deep breath and feel the air fill your lungs and nourish all the muscles in your body. Carefully stretch every part of your body. Feel the excitement as you get ready to begin. You feel exactly the way you want to feel. You are ready to have the best competition of your life.

**Lessons:**

**Highlights:**

**EXERCISE 12.6 - PAIN RELIEF**

If you are experiencing pain or discomfort due to an injury or an illness, record an imagery tape to complement your healing process. The following script will help you form symbolic and correct biological images to reduce and control your pain level. Set aside 15-20 minutes at least three times a day to engage in healing imagery. It might help if you go through an active or passive progressive relaxation exercise (see Section 8) before you go through your healing script. If you recorded your relaxation script on a tape, you might want to record your healing script right after it so that you don't have to change tapes in the middle of the exercise. Write down your lessons and highlights after each session. The following is an example of a script you can follow once you are relaxed. Modify it to suit your needs.

*As your mind becomes clearer and clearer, feel it becoming more and more alert. Somewhere deep inside of you, a brilliant light begins to glow. Sense this happening... The light grows brighter and more intense... This is the mind-body connection. Breathe into it... Energize it with your breath. The light is powerful and penetrating, and a beam begins to grow from it. The beam shines into your body now as you prepare to reduce your perception of pain or discomfort.*

*As you allow your body to sink down into your chair, bed or wherever you are resting... let your imagination travel directly to the area that has been causing you pain or discomfort... See the blood vessels that bring oxygen, proteins, and other healing substances... See the blood vessels wrapping around and traveling through the area of pain, dropping off their healing compounds and absorbing all the waste products... If you have taken medication, notice how it appears within the blood vessels and within the area of injury. Many medications form crystals when they are dissolved in fluid. Imagine the medication as tiny jewel-like crystals healing your body.*

*As you continue to focus on the area of pain, feel your own endorphins moving into the tissues. Imagine the endorphins like fluffy cotton, wrapping around the ends of the nerves, muffling and softening any pain messages.*

*If you feel that cold would help block your pain... imagine breathing in an icy blue-green mist with each breath... Recall the colour of icebergs or deep, frozen glaciers... Each time you breathe in... see the mist wrapping itself around and through the painful part, cooling the inflammation and decreasing the pain... Feel the pain changing as you imagine the mist filling up the area. You might also imagine bathing the painful area in a cool mountain stream... Notice how clear the cold water is... You can even see the colours and shapes of the tiny rocks deep in the icy stream.*

*If warmth seems to be the best for your pain at this time, imagine stretching your body out on a soft warm blanket in a special, safe place outdoors... Listen to the sounds around you: birds calling to each other, the sound of water flowing nearby... the soft wind blowing through the leaves. Notice the wonderful fragrances of flowers and trees in bloom, perhaps the smell of freshly baked bread coming to you on a soft breeze... As you lie on the blanket, feeling secure and protected, feel the warmth of the sun soaking into your body... You might be able to imagine a smaller image of the sun deep within the area that has been causing you pain... It may appear like a child's drawing of a smiling face within a golden circle... or it may simply glow like a clear golden marble... Feel the rays of sunshine moving into the surrounding tissue, warming and softening any pressure, tightness or discomfort.*

**EXERCISE 12.6 - PAIN RELIEF (cont)**

*Anytime you feel pain or discomfort, imagine your small inner sun inside of you soothing it away... Scan your body now and become aware of any changes that have occurred, knowing that each time you practice this or another imagery exercise, you will become more and more in control of soothing your pain.*

*Take a few slow, re-energizing breaths, and as you come back to your normal state of awareness, know that whatever is right for you at this point in time is unfolding just as it should, and that you have done your best, regardless of the outcome.*

**Lessons:**

**Highlights:**

**Serious Health Concerns**

Aside from pain and discomfort, it is possible that you will have to deal with more serious health concerns during your athletic career. For example, there are famous athletes who have been diagnosed with cancer but have made excellent come-backs due to high quality care, positive attitudes, and insurmountable determination. If you ever find yourself in a similar situation, that is, you are diagnosed with a cyst or a tumor that is or isn't cancerous, there is much you can do to initiate the healing process, even before you receive any medical treatment. There are many reports of athletes and non-athletes who have engaged in healing imagery to reduce or completely eliminate cysts, tumors and even cancer cells that have spread to other areas in their body.

As I was writing this book, my Mom found out she had an ovarian tumor the size of a baseball. At this point she was very ill and weak because she had lost so much weight in the previous year. Her physical resources might have been limited, but this did not take away her will to fight and remain positive up until her surgery, even if her oncologists told her they were suspecting cancer. Anxiety? Fear? Nausea? She faced this every day as she went for unpleasant tests and waited three weeks for her operation. However, she made every effort to stay in control of her thoughts and actions. At this point, it was healthy for her to express her emotions instead of keeping them inside.

Together, we made a healing imagery tape to help her cope with the extensive pain she felt throughout the day, to attempt to reduce and even eliminate the tumor she had inside her, and to stay positive and confident about the future. It was important that we incorporate words and phrases that were meaningful to her and gave her positive energy. I included the script she listened to three times a day while she awaited surgery (*see Appendix F*). It made her feel good because while she was listening to the tape, she wasn't worrying about the outcome of her surgery and whether or not she had cancer. Instead, she was soothing and relaxing her mind and body.

Healing imagery can be a powerful and effective technique to promote healing and recovery.

### TABLE 12.3 - SUMMARY SUGGESTIONS

1. Refine your imagery and mental practice skills as they can be invaluable to your performance, more than you might ever anticipate.
2. Practice using both internal and external imagery and determine which perspective is most beneficial to you. Both of them might prove to be extremely useful.
3. Try to incorporate all of your senses in your imagery, particularly the feeling you normally experience when you actually perform a skill.
4. Use your imagery skills to complement your physical training and to get optimally ready for competitions. More specifically, use them to enhance sport-related skills, plan and simulate competition strategies, solve problems, set goals, improve your focus, deal with emotions, and cope with injuries and illnesses.
5. Rehearse your performances with success to increase positive effects, your self-confidence and motivation.
6. Be persistent as it can take time to develop your imagery skills.

## Appendix F – Script to Reduce a Mass / Tumor

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*Before you begin your journey, find a quiet comfortable place, and give yourself permission to spend fifteen or twenty minutes taking care of yourself. Lie down, or sit with your back and neck completely supported. Allow your chair, bed, or wherever you are, to hold you. Allow yourself to relax... Bring all your attention into your inner self and feel your body let go as you begin to shut out the outside world.*

*Now focus on your breathing. Breathe easily and slowly. As you breathe in, feel your stomach rise. As you breathe out, let your stomach fall. Let go of any tension, and think to yourself "Relax." Inhale [count to 4]... Exhale [count to 4]... Inhale [count to 4]... Exhale [count to 4]... Feel a sense of peacefulness spread throughout your body.*

*Each time you breathe in, imagine that the air is a fresh, healing, colored mist... any color that comes to mind... Feel this mist entering your body through the tip of your toes and slowly drifting up inside your body... See and feel that mist beginning to fill you with relaxation, calm, and confidence... completely freeing your mind and body... Each time you breathe in, imagine this colored mist adding relaxation and confidence... Continue to see this colour fill your body until it is completely full of relaxation... You feel more and more at peace and confident that you are healing yourself. You are sinking deeper and deeper into a calm, receptive, and confident state... Calm, confident and in control...*

*In this relaxed, confident state, you and your body are totally receptive to the following positive suggestions. They will strengthen your confidence in your unique abilities to heal yourself and become perfectly healthy again.*

*You are strong, you are powerful and in control. Let your imagination travel directly to the area that has been causing you pain or discomfort... See the blood vessels that bring healing oxygen, proteins, and other healing substances to this area. See the blood vessels wrapping around and travelling through the mass inside your body, dropping off their healing compounds and absorbing all the waste products... Imagine this mass being destroyed by all the blood vessels and organs around it. Your ovaries, intestines, kidneys, liver and pancreas are powerful and in control and there is no way they are going to let this mass exist. Your organs are taking over the mass. See the mass gradually shrinking. It is getting smaller... and smaller... and all the remains naturally get filtered and excreted out of your body.*

*When you experience any pain or discomfort, imagine your healing energy flowing into that area, soothing it, making it strong and free. Picture a sun deep within the area... It may appear like a child's drawing of a smiling face within a golden circle... or it may simply glow like a clear golden marble... Feel the powerful sunrays radiating on the surrounding tissues, warming and softening any pressure, tightness or discomfort. Whatever the concern, give your body the command to heal itself. Your superior mental skills and mental strength give you a unique capacity to heal yourself. Your body is healing, becoming strong and perfectly healthy. You are feeling full of positive energy.*

*You can do it. You can beat this. You will be the winner at the end of this challenge. You will stand strong and proud on that podium with a medal and lei of violets around your neck. Imagine and believe that your body's own powerful defenses return to a strong, natural, healthy*

*state. You are feeling good energy and have a great appetite. Continue to see and feel yourself being free, invincible, and healthy.*

*You are loved by your family and by your friends, which gives you additional strength. You are also loved by Jesus who gives you healing power. Jesus will heal you.*

*Imagine yourself doing something you love to do... Imagine yourself achieving all of your future goals. Picture the people you love doing well and your relationships becoming more meaningful... your priorities in life being fulfilled. You have great reasons for being strong and healthy. All these reasons are helping you get well. Each positive thought and each positive image you have becomes ingrained in your mind and body, giving you incredible strength and total belief in yourself and your abilities. You are a survivor, you have always been a survivor. Like the hummingbird, you have the power to heal yourself, and you have a beautiful voice... Humm yourself back to perfect health.*

*You are doing extremely well. You are taking charge of your own recovery. Feel good about being in control and about directing your body's healing. At least three times a day, see and feel yourself healing and getting stronger and stronger. Do this before you get up in the morning, do it in the middle of the day, do it before you go to sleep at night. You feel good. You feel calm. You feel in control. You are ready to live some simple joys.*

*Continue relaxing for as long as you like. When you are ready, open your eyes, stretch, take a few slow, re-energizing breaths, and remember to make the best of this day.*