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Does yours drop off?

by Clive Leeke

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This article was first produced in the form of a presentation to RFU Panel Touch Judges and Referees, but the author and the editor believe that there are many aspects that are relevant to players and even their coaches.

Like most single words, the meaning of concentration depends on the context in which it is being used. In this article, the meaning is drawn from a definition relating to sport officiating in general, not specifically to our game of rugby. It is –

Concentration: The ability to focus on the relevant cues in the environment and to maintain that focus over the course of the whole contest.

Again, focus is one of those words that is used in different contexts; here it is meant as Attentional Focus. In a sporting situation, attentional focus depends primarily on ones motivation at the time and the intensity or importance of ones perceptions. The ability to focus will not only depend on many influences coming at the observer, but will also vary from observer to observer. Two individuals watching the same scenario may well focus on completely different aspects of not only what they are seeing but also what they perceive with their other sensors, especially hearing. We are all different when it comes to our mental approach to perceiving different situations.



Sometimes the attentional focus needs to be on a broad view, maybe the whole pitch or the defending team's positioning. Sometimes it needs to be on a very narrow view, maybe the foot of the ball carrier near the touchline as he dives for the in-goal and a glorious try.

Sometimes, as above, the attentional focus is external in that it is on events on the pitch. Sometimes it is internal in that it is your thoughts, probably about what has just happened or what you anticipate is likely to happen

Focusing may be the intention of the individual, but the intention does not always bear fruit because things get in the way, we are distracted from our objectives. Again, as with attentional focus, these distractions come from two sources; external and internal.

The external distractions include happenings on and off the pitch, in and around the match, which are not directly relevant to the intended concentration targets. These could include comments that are heard from the crowd, the coaches and the players; the fact that there is a low sun making viewing more difficult or an extreme of weather conditions; the fact that the match is one sided and the result is already a foregone conclusion.

The internal distractions are probably the most intrusive; your own thoughts and feelings, thinking about past and probable future events, both on and off the pitch. You have just made a poor decision or a bad play. It takes a great deal of concentration to minimise the effect that it will have on your next decision or next play.

In the definition above, one of the key words is *relevant* (cues). The major detrimental effect that distractions have is to draw one away from the relevant cues. Guess who said, "*The secret of concentration is not to let outside factors register. Be aware of them but keep them outside the bubble in which you are operating"*. A clue – he is a retired English international sportsman who demonstrated a high level of concentration in his on-field performances. (Answer at the end of the article.)

When I was refereeing, I began to realise that my concentration dropped away at roughly the same stage of most matches. I felt I was able to maintain a good level of concentration in the first half and spent half time re-focusing on the important match issues and geeing myself up mentally for the second half. This carried me through for the next ten minutes or so and then, unless the match was particular testing, I later realized, I went into a mental walkabout. (I used to call this my 'blue period'.) Many referees with whom I have discussed this have found that they suffer a similar lapse at roughly the same time in the match. Do you know if you have a 'blue' period? If you do, do you know if it occurs at roughly the same time in each match? Is this a common fault with all of us, whether referee, touch judge, player or coach? If it is one of our faults, is it possible to improve our concentration skills? As with other skills, the answer is Yes.

So, what are the skills we need to consider?



- 1. The ability to **change** attentional focus at appropriate times. Our game is seductive and occasionally causes us to watch the parts we want to look at, as would a spectator, rather than what we need to be looking at in our role as referee, coach etc. A twisting, evasive run by a centre or a crunching tackle is a marvellous thing to behold, but perhaps our priority should be to watch the player who has just passed the ball or identify where the tackler's supporting team mates are.
- 2. The ability to **maintain** a particular focus at other times. Again, this is around the priorities of our role at specific stages of play. Unless we are really concentrating on our priorities, looking at the area where the ball will come down from a high, hanging kick is likely to be more interesting than maintaining a watch on the kicker to see if he is hit late or whether he is following up as well as he should.
- 3. The ability to minimise the distractions. 'Nuff said. This is a problem in all areas of life, not just in our sport, both with the external distractions and the internal ones.
- 4. The ability to maintain the required focus throughout the whole period of the match. Long term concentration is a heck of a lot more testing than for the short term.

Having identified these skills, how can we develop them?

As with any skill development, the first stage is to be aware that there is an aspect of our skills bank that we need to develop. Kidding ourselves that we are good at executing that skill, without really assessing our individual level and then identifying if it is good enough, will result in our staying at that level. Once we are aware that our concentration could be improved, we need to recognise and identify our attentional shortfall(s). When is our own 'blue' period; what external factors intrude or annoy us and draw away our attention (Inane comments from those who do not really understand the game or what the players are trying to achieve? Players and coaches who are trying to influence us?); do we tend to relax mentally when the ball is dead and miss the cheap punch; are we affected by very cold or very hot conditions etc. etc.?

Once our needs are identified, we need a plan to develop them. This is where it becomes difficult because we are all different and the solutions that will work for one of us are likely to be quite different from what will work for the next one. What works for one may even be a complete turn-off for the next one. One of our international referees uses an aromatic oil on his sleeve, the occasional whiff of which reminds him to concentrate on his particular objectives for that match. Other effective aide memoirs include coloured cotton/string around the wrist, words written on the wrist or palm, relating particular phases of play to a need to concentrate on a particular aspect of that phase; the list of possible solutions is bounded only by our own imagination.

Concentration, like most other skills, can be practised and improved upon. There are several exercises that will assist here – the Internet is a good starting place to discover some. One method is to sit in a quiet room, eliminating all distractions, and hold an



object with which you are fairly familiar, let's say a rugby boot. Remind yourself of how the various parts feel; the soft leather, the hard studs, the cold plastic sole; look at the colours of the leather, laces and sole; feel the weight; smell the leather etc. Then place the object a few feet away, within sight, make a note of the time and concentrate on how the boot felt, what aspects you saw in it, the smell etc. You will eventually realise that you are no longer concentrating on it, but that your thoughts have drifted. Make a note of the time elapsed and try again. Try it a few times until you have extended the period of concentration and then try the same exercise with an increasing level of distractions, such as radio, TV, opening a window or doing it in a room where children are playing. There are many more exercises that will also help.

Remembering that we are all different, not all methods will work for all of us, but some of the following tips may help.

During a match, use certain trigger words such as 'position', 'focus', 'relax', depending on the changing circumstances and your personal needs.

Focus on the present, identify when you drift away mentally and identify what causes you to drift and bring yourself back with key words such as 'focus'.

Consider the real priorities on which to concentrate at each subsequent changing phase of the match – the ball just kicked ahead or passed; dead ball situations; foul play seen but play continuing.

Do not punish yourself for errors. You are a human being (despite popular opinion, even referees), no one ever get throughout a whole match without making some errors.

Think non-critically by not over-evaluating the last decision, but thinking how you will make the next one better.

Establish routines so that you are in familiar mental territory, to help you relax and feel in control.

There is plenty you can do before each match, to enhance your concentration for the match; the Building Blocks for Concentration.

Physical Fitness. Are you really fit enough for the job? If you are not, the first personal attribute to suffer will not be the legs or the lungs, it will be the brain. If that is under negative stress, concentration stands no chance.

Checklists. Identify which aspects are the main priorities for each match and make a note. Most people recall items more readily if they have written them down. Checklists also mean you have one less item that the brain will have to try to remember and memory and concentration are strongly linked.



Preparation. This will certainly mean different things to different people. We have all been used to preparing physically, do we prepare mentally to the same degree? Preparation could depend on what is on the checklist, what points are still relevant from the previous match or the previous match against the same opponents and many other factors.

Visualisation. If, before a match, you have visualised certain game situations and considered what your decisions would be for those situations, it is generally accepted that you are more likely to make the correct decision should that situation occur during the match than you would have done had you not visualised it pre-match. Pre-match visualisation also aids concentration.

This is obviously a very wide and complicated subject about which much has been written. Consideration of the above points may help to improve yours, so that, for *your* concentration, let's hope there will be no more dropping off!

(Answer to the quote – Geoff Boycott)