

Sports PSYCHOLOGY

tration that a quarterback uses to read a defense or a point guard uses to find a teammate filling the lane on a fast break. You use your awareness channel to read and react to the environment. Runners use awareness while training on city streets to navigate through traffic without ending up on the front grill of a car. Trail runners rely on awareness to see where their paths lead, especially if they're on unfamiliar terrain. Track runners need to be aware of other runners, and have to watch their spacing when running in close packs or drafting, to avoid collisions.

Analysis

The analysis channel comes from the same broad scope as awareness, but the direction is internal. You use this broad-internal focus when coming up with a game plan, when thinking about many different ideas at once, or when capturing the big-picture from a strategy perspective. Great coaches have extraordinary talents for using this kind of focus to create complex systems for practices and games. Runners use analysis to determine the best spots in their races to overtake their competitors or to push themselves for PRs. Many runners use a broad-internal focus to take their minds off of the intensity of the run itself and to think about other issues in their lives. I once worked with a runner whose day job was Vice-President of Marketing for a large corporation. He ran sub-three hour marathons, but also used running to come up with creative new concepts for work. He found that his best thinking was done on the trails.

Problem-Solving

This channel has a narrow, internal focus. You use the problem-solving channel to work through simple problems (what's 15-8?) or to call up visualization and imagery scenes. For example, stop reading right now and picture yourself running your favorite course, with your shoes tied

Pounding. Constant movement. No, this isn't your feet talking and it isn't your heart either. The blood being pumped through your circulatory system and the bones in your feet, place a distant second and third in a race with an opponent that doesn't wear a bib and never quits. Running with you every

What's Running through Your Head?

step of the way, be it one mile or twenty-six, are a myriad of thoughts that would fill the halls of the National Archives if they were printed, bound, and stored.

UNDERSTANDING FOCUS

by Geoff Miller

The Difference between Winning and Losing

Mental factors make the difference between winning and losing at the highest levels in sport. It takes focus, confidence, and commitment for athletes to perform well under pressure. In fact, years of training can crumble in less than ten seconds if a talented sprinter doesn't have what it takes when the gun goes off. A lack of confidence can throw a marathoner against the proverbial wall and stress can seemingly tie your shoes together when you can't deal with it effectively.

Winning Mind is a high-performance consulting company that helps elite and Olympic athletes perform under pressure. In our experience, we've found that the best athletes in the world have the ability to remain focused when it matters most. We've discovered that being focused in the right way is the true key to success.

The term "focus" is frequently thrown around loosely to help direct and describe athletic performance. But does anyone ever tell you what it really means to focus? How do you stay focused when fatigue overcomes you? How can you get the best out of yourself on a more consistent basis?

This article defines focus, explains how pressure and attention affect performance, and offers some real world examples of runners who've used focus in different ways to get through important training and competitive phases.

What Is Focus?

The easiest way to explain focus is to compare your mind to a TV set that only gets four channels. We'll call these channels Awareness, Analysis, Problem-Solving, and Action. Both scope and direction define focus and each of the four channels differs distinctly in both those dimensions.

Scope simply means how broadly or narrowly you're focused. Direction tells you whether your focus is external or internal: whether you're paying attention to the outside world or if you're in your head. By plotting scope and direction on a graph, you can observe how the four channels are divided and what kind of scope and direction makes up each one.

Awareness

The awareness channel combines a broad focus with an external one. This is the "in the moment" concen-

as tight as you like them, hearing the sound of your feet contacting the pavement or the track or the dirt. Could you create a vivid image from my directives? If so, you probably weren't thinking about anything else (your focus was narrow) and you probably weren't picking up on much going on around you (internal focus) while you were concentrating on that image.

Action

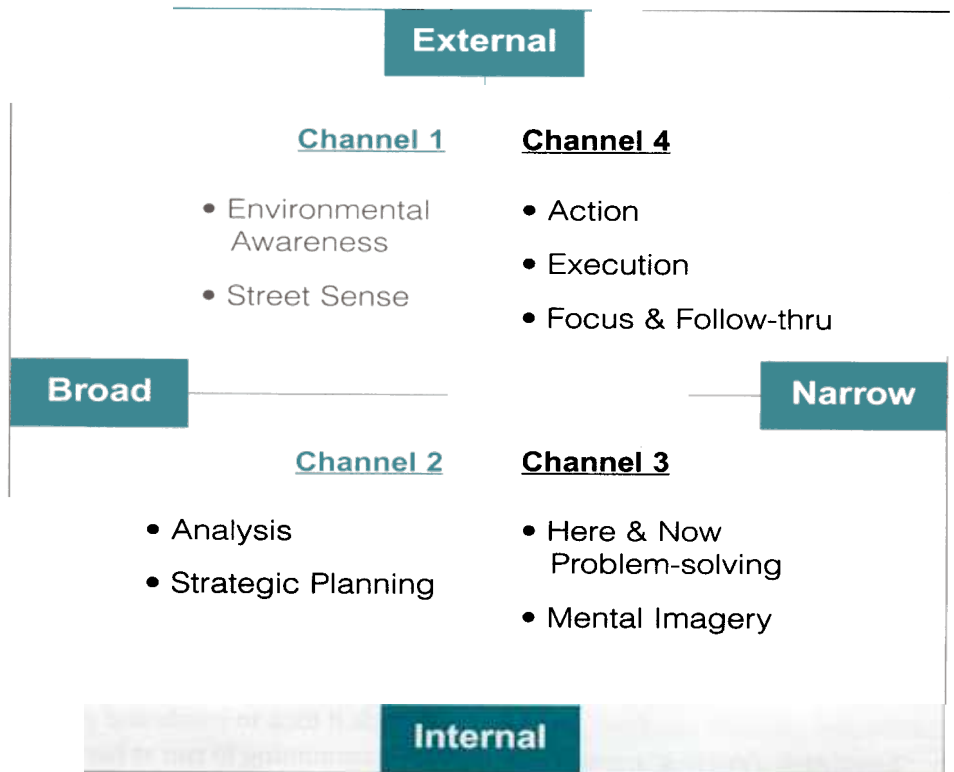
The action channel is the one that's most compelling to athletes. This is the channel you must be on to execute your skills. Imagine Tiger Woods burning a hole in the fairway with his competitive, single-minded stare. Or Dennis Mitchell, eyes bulging with intensity, as he settles into the blocks for the start of the 100 meters. You use the action channel when you see the finish line in front of you. This narrow-external kind of focus is most important to you in order to get the job done.

Properties of Focus

With your TV channels come a few restrictions on viewing. First, you

The easiest way to explain focus is to compare your mind to a TV set that only gets four channels. We'll call these channels Awareness, Analysis, Problem-Solving, and Action.

can only be on one channel at a time. There's no picture-in-picture capability in your head. You can't be both broad and narrow with your focus at the same time. Neither can you be internal and external simultaneously. If you've ever had a "day-dream" during a meeting or a lecture and had no idea what was being



discussed when you checked back in to reality, you understand this concept.

Second, each person has a favorite channel. We call this your "dominant attentional style." This favorite channel gives you the most confidence in dealing with the world. Most elite athletes prefer to operate on the action channel. Most business executives, coaches, consultants prefer the analysis channel. A computer programmer or an accountant might prefer the problem-solving channel.

Knowing your dominant attentional style is important, because when you start to feel pressure you first tune in to your favorite channel (even if it's the wrong channel to watch). This explains the common occurrence of "paralysis by analysis," which happens when athletes try to think their way out of trouble, instead of attending to external cues. In the sports world, there aren't many chances to stop and think, instead you have to read and react.

When you're performing at your best, you use all four channels, as you need them. A true "Zone" experience is one in which you switch from chan-

nel to channel effortlessly without relying on your dominant channel (unless the situation calls for it). An elite runner uses all four channels by having a plan (Analysis) before a run, staying aware of the competition

Knowing your dominant attentional style is important, because when you start to feel pressure, you first tune in to your favorite channel (even if it's the wrong channel to watch).

(Awareness), working through tough spots with visual and kinesthetic images, taking his/her mind off of racing to help get into a rhythm (Problem-Solving), and narrowing down to just the essentials when it's time to deliver the victory (Action).

Case Study

Jessica is a successful management consultant for an international firm

She played soccer in college and continues to run and go rock climbing for enjoyment, exercise, and to stay physically competitive. While she occasionally enters 10Ks and half marathons, she doesn't "race" with any particular need to finish at the top of her age group or to set a PR. Jessica has had some experiences with mental training and had a college coach who worked with the team on "the mental side." This relatively positive experience inspired her to schedule a few sessions with us to work on improving her performance in training runs.

We began by assessing Jessica's dominant attentional style with a powerful questionnaire called The

Success, from a mental perspective, does not need to involve mastering a complex set of exercises, but it does require some confidence and discipline.

Attentional and Interpersonal Style (TAIS) inventory. TAIS is a sophisticated performance assessment tool that was originally developed to measure concentration and personality factors in Olympic athletes. Not surprisingly, Jessica's favorite channel was analysis. Her work as a management consultant requires that she carefully plan and thoroughly analyze various business and interpersonal issues. Indeed, one of her favorite things about running is that it gives her time to sort through all her thoughts without colleagues, clients, family, and friends vying for her attention. Running is her time for personal reflection. However, when she gets to critical points in her runs, her tendency to analyze becomes a weakness. She calculates remaining distance, estimates mile pace, compares her exertion levels and fatigue to previous runs, and so on. While the wheels are turning faster and

faster between her ears, she loses focus on the simple things that control her pace and keep her running smoothly. In addition, she has times when her thoughts turn to poor performances, fear that she is losing her edge, and doubt that she can continue on her normal pace.

One of the strategies that we and Jessica agreed upon, was that she needed to find a way to get "out of her head" at those times when she felt like her thoughts were overtaking her. The first step was to recognize when it was happening. The next step was to consciously "change channels", so she could have a narrow, external focus for action. To do this, she was to start focusing on her breathing. We asked her to count the seconds it took to inhale and exhale, while continuing to run at her normal speed. After a few counting breaths, she was to turn her attention to her feet. Her task was to count her steps to ten and start over with one, but not tally the total sets of ten or any other sets of numbers.

By narrowing her visual field to the space on the ground just in front of her, she would continue to stay focused on a simple, yet overlooked, key to running: not falling down! We didn't want her to be so focused on something else that she didn't realize where she was stepping. Knowing that nobody can be on two channels at the same time, Jessica could limit her analytical thinking by staying narrowly and externally focused on her steps. But if she counted too high, she would end up focusing internally on the number she was on instead of on taking the next step, so we limited the count to ten.

Final Words

The key to effective focus is not hard to find if you know where to look. You use all four attentional channels every day with ease. Success, from a mental perspective, does not need to involve mastering a complex set of exercises, but it does require some confidence and discipline. You must

be willing to learn enough about yourself that you can break the attentional channel-surfing habits preventing you from focusing effectively. You must also be patient enough to develop the ability to quickly and effortlessly switch channels when and where your performance environment demands it. As Confucius said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Think about that on your next run . . . but only during your regularly scheduled analysis channel time! 🏃

Geoff Miller is a partner at Winning Mind LLC, a San Diego-based high-performance consulting group dedicated to helping people improve their ability to perform under pressure and achieve meaningful goals. Winning Mind works with elite performers in Fortune 500 companies, professional and amateur sports, and Special Forces military units.

For more information on Winning Mind coaching programs and assessment of dominant attentional style, visit www.thewinningmind.com or email Geoff at miller@thewinningmind.com.

In the next issue . . .

Sleep, the Forgotten Ergogenic Aid

Running Moms: Balancing Training and Nursing

Training Periodization for Beginning Runners to Elite Athletes

Benefits of Carbohydrate during Exercise: A Closer Look at Energy Gels

How Learning to "Center" Will Make You a Better Runner