



sporting excellence

Optimising
Sports
Performance
Using
NLP

Ted Garratt

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Introduction

I can do anything I want with the power of my mind.

Mark McGuire, St. Louis Cardinals,
on breaking the baseball home-run record.

The American soldier, Colonel George Hall, was held prisoner in Vietnam for a number of years. He was kept in difficult physical conditions where it was hard to stay fit and certainly impossible to play his favourite game, golf. In order to occupy his mind and keep his sanity he played a round of golf over his favourite course back home, *inside his head*, at least once a day over the five-and-a-half-year period he was held captive. This was in spite of being kept in solitary confinement most of the time in a cell 8½ feet x 8½ feet.

On departing for Vietnam he had played off a four handicap. Five-and-a-half years later, on his return, he was asked to play a round with some friends. To their amazement, and in spite of his weakened physical condition, he immediately played to his original handicap. When they expressed their amazement and said that he had not played for five-and-a-half years he told them that, on the contrary, he had played mentally every day over that period and knew every blade of grass, every bunker and every shot he had ever played.

Source: *The Psychology of Winning* Tape

This story has entered into legend and illustrates a key point: provided that mental practice is made as real as possible and sustained over a sufficient period, it becomes generative. This simply means that it becomes easier and more useful. This is one of those occasions where it is true that PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT.

As we will see later in the book, practice actually doesn't always make perfect. A lot of us struggle with physical practice because it is based upon inappropriate habits, rhythms and methods. The interesting thing about mental preparation is that the same rules apply, but we can solve the issue inside our heads before carrying out the actual physical practice. Therefore it can be extremely useful to have a positive role model in some specific aspects of our mental or physical performance.

In 1991 Steve Backley won virtually everything he entered. Then came the World Championships where he didn't even qualify. When asked why this occurred, he responded that he 'couldn't hear the music' (a classic NLP response). Two weeks later he won a competition in Sheffield, against the same opponents. His analysis of this victory was that 'he had operated from an altered mental state and that the mind is incredibly powerful and the body follows.'

Source: *Equinox* TV Programme

The fear of failure, even with occasional sportspeople, should never be underestimated. In many walks of life additional stress is caused as much by the fear of failure or looking silly as by actually trying something and dealing with the consequences. This is why the practical part of the book offers a variety of techniques for dealing with disempowering beliefs and developing more useful and positive ones.

However, this is not a book about positive thinking. I remember talking to a cricketer just prior to the start of the new season when he was looking to establish himself in the first team of his county for the first time. In the first game he knew that he was due to face Curtly Ambrose, then the number one fast bowler in the world.

To prepare himself for making his breakthrough he bought a book on positive thinking and read it avidly. When I happened to meet him at a lunch he told me how his approach was going to be not to allow the bowler to intimidate him and try not simply to survive, but to hit every ball for a four or six.

Readers with an NLP background will have noted the mixed use of language that the cricketer used. He was at least as concerned with what he was *not* going to do as with what he *was* going to do. Also, the outcome he had set himself was unrealistic and to a large extent out of his control. He had not planned for dealing with factors such as the bowler himself (in this case a significant issue), and the fielders. Also, I felt that he could possibly put himself both physically and mentally in some danger.

Imagine if his plan worked initially, and he actually managed to score a series of boundaries off Curtly Ambrose. All the evidence was that Ambrose would respond to the assault, and that the response could have interesting implications for the batsman, both in the short and long-term!

Without wishing to inhibit his enthusiasm (and bearing in mind that this was a chance encounter), I discussed with him what he could actually deal with and be responsible for, i.e. responding to a bouncer, playing late, playing a bad shot. I pointed out that how he handled these issues would ultimately determine whether he succeeded as a cricketer. His response was that he preferred the more gung-ho approach which had been in the book on positive thinking, as the benefit would be more immediate.

This conversation provided food for thought. It was a complete coincidence that I, with my background, had sat next to him at lunch. Obviously I didn't want to damage his beliefs regarding his new approach. Also the social limitations of the lunch meant that the conversation had been extremely fragmented. I wondered whether I could have done more, but decided that there was very little more I could have done.

Over the next few weeks I watched the batsman's progress with interest. In the game against Northamptonshire he made 17 runs, but stood very little chance against Ambrose.

Monitoring his progress over the season, I noticed that a similar pattern occurred. He would get in and make a few runs against bowlers who weren't famous but, as soon as he came up against someone famous, he was out very quickly. These incidents occurred three years ago. The batsman in question never did establish himself in his county's first team, is no longer on their books, and now plays League cricket.

The purpose of this story is not to debunk positive thinking. Rather it is to underline that personal change in sport (as in life) is not always a matter of a quick fix, although occasionally one incident can change someone permanently, e.g. a win against a much higher-ranked opponent may create a breakthrough.

Sporting Excellence

The picture I have tried to paint in this section is one of a planned, focused evolution in improvement in performance, building on increasingly successful results and enjoying the process. One of the wonderful things about sport is that normally progress can be measured either individually, collectively or both.

Chapter 7

Create Effective Preparation Strategies

Nowadays it seems almost unnecessary to point out that sportspeople should put as much energy – both physical and mental – into the preparation as into the actual event itself. However, it is only in recent years that the importance of preparation has become generally accepted. Even today some sportspeople still think that preparation requires only a physical warm-up and a bit of psyching up for good measure. Others, however, are very aware of the dangers of this narrow approach.

It is always easy to be focused and 'up' for the challenge when you are the underdogs, but the real art of professionalism comes from performing again and again when you are expected to succeed – that marks out the true champions.

Phil de Glanville

Terry Orlick shows the balance of key factors in an interesting way:

Performance = Physical Preparation + Technical Skill + Psychological Readiness

It may seem odd, but it is also necessary to create effective preparation strategies. In order to do this, start by asking yourself these questions:

- a. What is my desired outcome for the preparation (see Chapter 6, *Develop Positive Goals*)?
- b. What does this outcome say about me as a sportsperson, my beliefs, strengths, weaknesses etc.?
- c. How will I know that I have achieved my preparation outcome?
- d. What specific techniques do I want to work on as part of my preparation, e.g. association/dissociation, anchoring etc?
- e. Should I keep a written list of my outcomes and progress? If so, this list should be updated on a regular basis.
- f. How will I reward myself when my preparation has achieved its outcome?

Activity

- Affirmations

Use single words or a short sentence to get yourself ready to perform e.g. 'I am a winner' or 'success'!

Activity

- Focusing your attention

In preparing effectively, wandering eyes mean a wandering mind, a mind that encourages interference factors to intrude. Focus your attention through visualising (thus focusing internally, inside your head), or by focusing on a particular object or person. Try to eliminate all other sights and sounds.

Activity

- Using distraction

Instead of focusing nervous or negative attention on the upcoming game, try diverting and diffusing your attention by doing something else. Listen to relaxing music on headsets or do anything else that will take your mind off the game (when Dean Richards and Jeremy Guscott played rugby for England, they used to distract themselves by playing cards).

Activity

- Breaking down outcomes

If the goal or outcome that you have set seems too large or difficult, break it down into more realistic and achievable chunks. This will help you to achieve some success more quickly and easily, and will motivate you to achieve further success.

Activity

- Relaxation

Many great sportspeople have an amazing ability to 'switch off' just before an important event. Mohammed Ali could sleep just before a big fight, George Best before a game. In a different context Winston Churchill catnapped most afternoons, even at the height of the war. Sleep obviously worked for these people, but don't try it if you tend to wake up feeling irritable or worse than you felt before you slept. Relaxation does not necessarily require sleep. Indeed many relaxation exercises are designed to ensure that sleep does not occur. Chapter 25, *Use Relaxation Techniques*, gives some examples of relaxation techniques.

Chapter 12

Recognise The Signals Of Success

It might sound odd to suggest that the amateur or professional sportsperson should acknowledge their improvement in performance. However, it is intriguing how many either seem not to spot the difference, or notice it but discount it and place emphasis only on other areas that could be improved.

In working with managers in organisations it is amazing how difficult it is to get more than lip-service regarding positive reinforcement – to actually get them doing it. This is possibly because so many people feel uncomfortable about receiving praise, tending either to deny their expertise modestly or to find negative reasons about why praise was given.

Evidence suggests that balanced feedback containing positive reinforcement works effectively. Many people use the feedback sandwich:

- giving specific feedback on an issue or skill
- giving specific feedback on an area to work on or develop
- agreeing a positive direction

This is a simple, unsophisticated model that also enhances the relationship between colleagues and between sportsperson and coach.

Some people find it difficult to differentiate between feedback and criticism. The key differences are:

- Criticism focuses on the person, whereas feedback focuses on the behaviour or the situation.
- Criticism is general, whereas feedback is specific.
- Criticism evaluates, blames and finds fault, while feedback describes and seeks remedies.
- Criticism dwells on what happened in the past, while feedback emphasises what will be done in the future.

It is also worth pointing out that both criticism and feedback are not just received from an external source. Both may be delivered internally through internal dialogue or self-talk and, although not heard by anyone else, it frequently causes more long-term damage than feedback received from others.

Of course recognising signals of success is not just about feedback. It needs to be based on something substantial. The obvious ways of recognising signals is through measured performance, but this will only indicate the improvement, not necessarily how it was achieved. Knowing how it was achieved will make it possible to repeat it.

As already stated, within NLP a great deal of attention is paid to how we receive and respond to information provided by the five senses: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory. Sportspeople will know through their senses what it looks, sounds and feels like to get some things right. This analysis will be a combination of obvious factors, e.g. in cricket seeing the ball onto the bat, hearing the sound as the ball hits the centre of the bat, recognising the feel in the arms and body when everything is working properly. But it goes a lot deeper than that. It is possible to recognise and develop the internal signals of successful performance.

Sportspeople will often talk about feeling just right (or not) on the day. These internal factors can be isolated, worked on and honed. In the same way that proper physical repetition would enable the body to respond appropriately, mental repetition can achieve the same objective.

It was all mental. I kept focused and fought for every point. I never gave up and took it point by point and tried to stay positive. It took a while but eventually I started to play a little bit smarter.

Mary Pierce after defeating Martina Hingis
in a tennis tournament.

When sportspeople talk about feeling right, that's normally exactly what they mean. Through a combination of the senses the mind becomes prepared and the performance of the body follows on.

Therefore in the same way that they work on recognising the signals of physical success, the sportsperson needs to pay as much attention to recognising the signals of success through the senses. The following activities will help you to develop the skills.

Activity

- After a successful performance analyse through the five senses what you saw, heard, felt, smelt or tasted *at the time of peak performance*.
- Note whatever internal dialogue/self-talk was taking place and the impact it had.
- Practise re-creating the signals of success in your mental warm-ups and mental rehearsal.

Activity

- Do the above for a non-sporting context as well. Find the signals.
- Use the NLP process of anchoring (explained in chapter 7) to cross the use of these signals into a sporting situation.

Using a range of techniques and practices from NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming), Ted Garratt leads all sportspeople—professionals, serious amateurs and occasional players alike—along the road to excellence. Well aware that the term “NLP” might sound baffling to those who have not heard it before, he explains in layman’s terms exactly how it helps people achieve success. The author enables his reader to execute a planned, focused evolution of performance. Underlining the importance of mental and physical preparation, as well as the need to develop positive beliefs, he provides exercises, techniques and advice for:

- mentally warming up
- practice activities
- mental rehearsal activities
- psyching up activities
- recognising signals of success
- becoming more relaxed
- managing stress and burnout
- harnessing self-awareness
- improving memory
- focusing your attention
- developing strategies for success
- paying attention to what works
- dealing with difficulties
- harnessing aggression
- developing self-confidence
- creating effective preparation strategies.

Sporting Excellence will help sportspeople at all levels achieve remarkable differences in their performance in as little as four weeks. Try something slightly different, and achieve optimum performance—every time!

Ted Garratt founded the organisation *Target Resources*, a human resources consultancy specialising in training and development. He is involved in all types of organisations and sectors, and specialises in facilitating personal, team and organisational change.



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