

Using mental rehearsal to prepare for officiating

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What is mental rehearsal?

Mental rehearsal is also known as imagery or visualisation. It involves using all of the senses to create or recreate an event or image in the mind.

How does it work?

Mental rehearsal activates a network of neural coded programs that activate physiological responses. Therefore, imagining something means you are actually strengthening the neural pathways required for that skill and the more likely you are to reproduce it again in the future. Also by mentally practising, you become more familiar with the actions required to perform a skill. These actions can become coded into symbols that make the actions more familiar or automatic.

Benefits of mental rehearsal to officials

Unlike athletes, officials do not often get the chance to practise their skills. Mental rehearsal is ideal for officials as it allows you to practise officiating specific situations or events. This is a very specific form of practice, with distinct benefits. Mental rehearsal can help you:

- learn, improve and practise your skills
- improve your performance
- improve mind-body synchronicity
- boost confidence by rehearsing previous good performances and practising new situations
- improve concentration by allowing the mind to be more organised and focused on the right cues
- control emotional responses by mentally practising relevant situations.

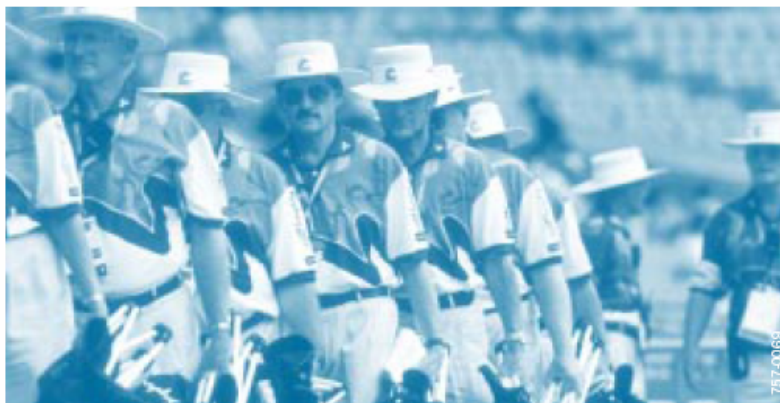
How to mentally rehearse

Preparation:

- At first it is best to eliminate all distractions, to be comfortable and relaxed. Eventually you will be able to use mental rehearsal anywhere.
- Control your breathing, to help you relax and clear your mind.
- Relax your body, eliminate muscular tension.

When you are imagining your skill or performance:

- use all of your senses
- make the imagery realistic, precise and vivid
- imagine in real time
- use a combination of internal and external imagery.



An internal perspective in mental rehearsal is one where you imagine what you would usually see and feel when you are actually performing the skill. An external perspective is like viewing yourself on video — you see things from an observer's perspective. Research has indicated that elite performers tend to switch between internal and external imagery perspectives, so you should practise both.

Start with simple scenarios as you get used to mental rehearsal. Early mental rehearsal practice sessions might involve using all of your senses to create non-sport images. For example, imagine you are jumping into an ice-cold swimming pool on a hot day, smelling a barbecue cooking, listening to the wind in the trees or looking at a beautiful sunset, to remind you to employ all of your senses when imagining.

You might like to dictate an imagery session to tape, and then play it back after you have relaxed. This allows you to use less conscious thinking, and focus on really imagining as vividly as possible the scenarios you are describing. Or you may find it useful to view video footage of officials in your sport, and then imagine yourself in the same situations. How would you react? What would you do?

What to mentally rehearse

Start with simple skills and situations, so that you can experience mastery over mental rehearsal. For example, you might imagine officiating a penalty kick in soccer. Once you are reasonably skilled at mentally rehearsing isolated skills, they can be combined into more complex situations such as penalty corners in hockey or coping with a fractious team in football.

It is beneficial for officials to mentally rehearse:

- simple skills
- complex sequences of skills
- game/competitive situations
- new skills they are mastering

- how they want to feel when they officiate (for example, umpiring with confidence).

When to mentally rehearse

- Before games/competitions.
- Before executing specific skills (for example, before officiating the penalty kick).
- During breaks in play if appropriate.
- After events as an aid to debriefing and goal setting — especially where video footage of your performance is unavailable.
- When you are feeling nervous or emotional, use mental rehearsal to review skills and abilities, or imagine you are feeling calm and confident.
- Any time you have the chance to mentally practice (for example, at home).

What to do if you are finding mental rehearsal difficult

- You may be focusing too much on one of your senses (often visual imagery), when in actual fact you are better at another form of mental rehearsal, such as kinaesthetic (feeling) imagery. Make sure you consider all of your senses and experiences when imagining performing.
- Practise imagining simple things you are very familiar with, such as your bedroom at home or your best friend's face. Imagining a very familiar setting will often teach you how to use mental rehearsal.
- Watch a videotape of you officiating. After skill execution, pause the tape and mentally replay what you have just seen, focusing on how it looked or felt.
- If you get the chance to practise, stop after you perform a particular skill, and mentally review it.

For more information see Weinberg, R and Richardson, P 1990. *Psychology of Officiating*, Leisure Press, Champaign, Illinois.