

## Chapter 2

# MENTAL IMAGERY



Creating (and Recreating)  
Success

## MENTAL IMAGERY

### Creating and Recreating Success

*I try to visualize my race before I swim. Like I'll lie down and I'll relax - - totally relax - - and just think how I'm going to swim my race, how I'm going to, you know, get into the turns and out of the turns, how my stroke is going to be. I go through my entire race*

*National Team Swimmer*

*In warm-up, I swim in the lane that I'm going to be racing in and that kind of helps me. You know, I look up in the stands and picture what it is going to be like with people in it. I get a good feel for me surroundings and imagine what it is going to be like during the race. And think about the people that are going to be in that heat with me and what lanes they're going to be in.*

*1998 World Championship Swimmer*

### What is Mental Imagery?

*Athletes: Take a minute and think back to your best race last season. Picture the pool where the meet took place, see your competitors, try to experience how you felt standing on the blocks, recall what you were thinking the last 50m, feel your reaction as you touched the wall.*

*As you thought about your best race, were you able to make the experience "real"? You may not know it, but when recreating your past success you were using mental imagery, the second skill in the Mental Toolbox.*

Mental imagery is a skill athletes can tap into to help reach their goals. Look back at the quotes listed above - - they illustrate how mental imagery can be used to achieve goals through mental preparation for success. Imagery can also be used to help adjust pre-competitive and competitive mood and energy levels (for example, if you are too nervous, you can help yourself relax by mentally taking yourself to a quiet, calm environment). Finally, imagery can be effective when learning a skill through mental practice— an athlete can work on turns without getting in the water! Read on to learn more about what a powerful tool imagery can be.

Most athletes already use mental imagery naturally, though often not in a systematic or purposeful manner. Similar to physical skills, mental skills such as imagery need to be practiced and used in a variety of settings so that one can call on them when the pressure is on.

Included in this edition of the Mental Toolbox: Imagery is a brief introduction to when and how to use mental imagery. Also included at the end of the chapter is a guide for coaches on teaching mental imagery, complete with exercises and imagery scripts for two different age groups.

### ***How Can Imagery Improve Performance?***

In addition to the ways athletes in the above stories described their uses for imagery, there are a number of other uses for this versatile skill.

***To see success:*** Athletes can see and feel themselves achieving goals. This helps build confidence that these goals can be achieved. This supports the adage “Seeing is Believing”.

***To motivate:*** Sometimes in the middle of a long period of training, it can become difficult to maintain the proper intensity level needed to get the most out of practice. Base training in the pool can be mentally challenging, to say the least. Thoughts and images of past and future competitions can be helpful in maintaining persistence and intensity level while training.

***To manage energy level:*** Imagery can be used to change energy level, using calming images to relax, or energizing images to “psych” up.

***To learn/perfect skills:*** Imagery can be used as an additional form of practice to help master a particular skill. Or, imagery can be used to correct errors in swim technique--either by reducing complex movements to simple skills or slowing the movements down to better analyze them for technique errors.

***To refocus:*** During practice and competition, many distractions can arise that prevent an athlete from maintaining an optimal focus. Imagining what to focus on can often help get an athlete back on track, by helping remind her about what is important.

***To prepare for competition:*** Just as a swimmer needs to prepare physically for competition by stretching and warming up, he needs to get mentally ready. He can imagine himself in the physical competition environment and mentally rehearse key elements of his performance. He can also prepare for the unexpected by imagining himself in difficult situations and then see himself successfully dealing with them. Finally, he can also see himself succeeding, touching the wall with a best time.

***To evaluate performance.*** After a swim, imagery can be used to evaluate performance. An athlete can replay her swim in her head, to reinforce what she did well and evaluate those aspects that need to be improved.

**To help recover from an injury.** Injuries are no fun. However, there are mental skills athletes can use to help in the recovery process- imagery being one such skill. A swimmer can use imagery to visualize herself healing from her specific injury; and to visualize performing specific skills in their sport to stay “fresh”.

## Tips to Best Learn and Use Imagery

**Be calm and relaxed:** Imagery is most often effective when the mind is calm and the body is relaxed. If your body feels tense, take a few minutes to relax and get yourself focused. If you get distracted while practicing imagery, let the distracting thoughts and images float past as you reflect on the image.

**An internal or external perspective can be used:** An **internal** perspective suggests that the swimmer views his image as he would from his own eyes. An **external** perspective of imagery is very similar to watching yourself on TV. The swimmer creates and views an image as if she was watching a videotape of herself. One perspective is no better than the other; both internal and external perspectives are important and useful when practicing imagery skills. Practice using both types of perspectives.

**Use all the senses:** Often, athletes only use their visual sense when imaging--seeing themselves perform. But equally important is feel, sound, thoughts, body position, and even smell and taste, as these are all part of the athletic experience. Paying attention to the detail of such sensations related to swimming can help make imagery more *vivid*. Go back to the recall exercise at the beginning of the chapter. Make a conscious effort to experience the race with all the senses. Can you do it?

**Control the Mental Images:** In addition to vividness, being able to control images--making sure you see and feel yourself perform as you want to perform--is another vital piece of successful imagery.

**At first, keep imagery practice simple:** It is generally best to first learn and practice imagery in a quiet environment with few distractions. Start by imaging basic objects or places such as your bedroom or a lemon. Try to manipulate the image - - move the furniture in your room or peel the lemon. The key is to first learn how to create and recreate mental images. Later, this skill can be applied to swimming.

**Use movement:** Make images more vivid by including some movement with the imagery--this can help create a body experience to match what is being imagined - - which can strengthen the image itself. Given the physical nature of swimming including movements can be very helpful in increasing imagery effectiveness and self-awareness.

***Practice, practice, practice:*** Remember that--just like physical skills--mental imagery can only be improved through practice. Spend time every week working on imagery skills. This can be made easier by setting aside a particular time of day to use for imagery training.

***Integrate into practice:*** There are countless opportunities during practice to use imagery to help swimming . . . take advantage of these opportunities. For example, image correct technique before doing a swimming drill; simulate races during intense workouts; prepare for tough intervals by imaging swimming the interval, feeling the fatigue and discomfort.

## Coaches Guide

At first teaching mental imagery may seem like a frightening task. How can you control or influence what your swimmers' image? Well you can't. But with some patience and some guidance you can steer them in the right direction. In this section we have provided you with a general outline that should serve as your guide when teaching your athletes the skill of Imagery.

### Grab em'

We need to get the athletes attention so they are motivated to learn imagery. We have found the following exercises to be beneficial in demonstrating to athletes the powers of metal imagery.

**Arm as an iron bar.** Have your swimmers pair off (similar heights if possible). Instruct your athletes to stand facing each other about arms length apart. Have swimmer #1 rest an arm, palm facing up, on this partner's shoulder. Have swimmer #2 take her hands and link them around swimmer #1's extended arm right above the elbow. Swimmer #1 is then instructed to tighten his arm so as not to let swimmer #2 bend it with her strength downward. Let each partner take a turn in both positions before moving on.

In the second part of this exercise, ask the swimmer who has his arm extended to imagine that starting from his shoulder his arm is a strong steel bar that extends through to the other wall. When this image is created, again have the other swimmer push down on the arm. In most cases when the image of the steel bar is created the arm is much stronger relative to the first scenario.

Explain to your swimmers that they have just experienced the power of mental imagery. Just by imagining that their arm was an iron bar they gained some strength. Now just imagine what can happen if this same skill is applied to swimming.

**Bolt on a String.** Give each of your swimmers a string threaded through a large bolt. Have your swimmers steady their elbows on a table or flat surface. Have them hold one of each of the two sides of the string in each hand, between the forefinger and thumb (so the string forms a triangle, one side in each hand and the bolt hanging at the bottom). Instruct your swimmers to imagine the bolt moving from side to side like a pendulum of a clock. Most swimmers will experience some sort of movement in their bolt. Next try having your athletes move the bolt in a clockwise circle by just imagining it. You can also have them try counter-clockwise and front to back. In most instances swimmers report movement in their bolts without purposefully moving it.

To explain this exercise, tell you swimmers that the subtle impulses sent from the brain to the arms and hands as a result of the mental imagery, and these muscle impulses are responsible for the movement in the bolt. Now, discuss how this concept applies to swimming.

## **Teach the Basics of Imagery**

Take 5-10 minutes to review with your athletes the material presented at the beginning of the chapter. Place emphasis on how imagery can be used to improve performance and discuss tips to effective use of imagery.

### **Introductory Imagery Exercises\_ (exercises 1 and 2)**

We are now ready to have the athlete practice using imagery. Before asking your swimmer's to visualize themselves moving and swimming there are several warm-up exercises you can use, to help them hone their imagery skills.

1. Have your swimmers imagine an inanimate object related to swimming such as their goggles, kickboard, fins, pull-buoy. Talk them through the visualization asking them to imagine various aspects of the object such as color, size, feel and shape. Speak slowly and allow the swimmers some time to draw a picture in their head.
2. Instruct your swimmers to imagine the pool they work out in everyday. Have them pay close attention to the smell of the pool, the details of the deck, the lighting, and the feeling they have when they walk on deck. Again, you are having your swimmers imagine inanimate objects; this type of imagery will help them to hone their imagery skills.
3. Think of any other inanimate/animate objects for your swimmers to visualize, their best friend, a favorite CD cover, a swim coach/teacher at school, the list is endless.

### **Basic Imagery Training Exercises (exercise 2 and 4)**

In the beginning keep the imagery exercises simple. Do not try to immediately jump into full race run-throughs. Give your swimmers a chance to sharpen their skills through less complex imagery training and then have them build up to race simulations.

1. Spend some time allowing your swimmers to imagine themselves swimming, from both an internal and external perspective. Allow them to get comfortable with imagining their strokes. You may want to try to incorporate some video at this point, so they can watch themselves swim and also watch other swimmers who have good technique or similar body types.
2. If you are teaching a new skill, give your swimmers a chance to incorporate the new skill into their imagery scripts. Spend some time imagining as well as doing the new skill.

3. Another good imagery exercise would be imagining starts, turns and streamlines. When you set aside time in practice to practice starts, turns and streamlines also spend some time using imagery to fine-tune these skills. Again some video may come in handy when teaching and imagining good starts, turns and streamlines.

### **Race Simulation** (exercise 3)

Once your swimmers have spent several weeks working on basic imagery skills, they are now ready for a race simulation. When first conducting a race simulation imagery session, keep it short. Maybe only include the starting sequence and the first 25/50 at pace depending on the race. Keep in mind such details as stroke count, breathing and the feel of the water over the body.

Included at the end of the chapter is a sample imagery script.

## Exercises to Develop Your Mental Imagery Skills

Below is a preview of the exercises included in this chapter to help you develop your imagery skills.

**Exercises 1, 2, 3, 4** are for the older swimmers. They highlight many areas central to imagery such as incorporating all the senses, imagining your specific swimming skills, using imagery in competitive situations and controlling the outcome of your images. Each of these worksheets should be used in conjunction with an imagery session.

**Exercises 5 and 6** are designed for younger swimmers. They introduce the idea of creating images about swimming and incorporating those images into daily practice.

**Sample Imagery Script for Swimming Competitions.** A sample imagery script has been included for your use. Consider this, like many of the other exercises, as springboard for other imagery scripts. You are not tied to this one script, change it to best suit your needs, this is only a suggestion to get you started with imagery.

Finally at the end of the chapter a section has been included to aid you in **tracking** your imagery skill improvement.

***Imagery Exercise 1: Imagery Sensory Checklist***

This is an exercise designed to help you begin to integrate your senses into your imagery. As you create each of the following images in your mind, rate your ability to do so based on this scale:

**0 = No Image      1 = Some Image      2 = Clear Image**

- \_\_\_ 1. The room you are currently in
- \_\_\_ 2. The suit you will wear in practice this afternoon
- \_\_\_ 3. Tasting a juicy lemon
- \_\_\_ 4. The sound of your alarm clock
- \_\_\_ 5. The pool you last competed in
- \_\_\_ 6. The feel at the end of a long kick set
- \_\_\_ 7. Performing dryland exercises
- \_\_\_ 8. Jumping into a cold pool at 5:30 in the morning
- \_\_\_ 9. The roaring approval of a crowd
- \_\_\_ 10. Feeling dry mouthed and tired after a workout
- \_\_\_ 11. The discomfort in your muscles during the last 50m of a race
- \_\_\_ 12. The anticipation and anxiety waiting in the ready room.

You may notice as you review your scores, that certain senses produce clearer images than others. This may provide direction for extra attention and practice--create your own images to test those senses you have the most difficulty with.

### **Imagery Exercise 2: Imaging Sport Skills**

As you refine your ability to image with all of your senses, you want to begin using imagery to see yourself performing a skill in your sport. Work through the progression at your own pace. For example, if you can't image yourself performing sport skills right now, keep working on your practice situation and movement imagery until they are very vivid and controllable before trying the sport skill section again.

Following these steps may make it easier to do this:

**1. Imagine that you are in the pool in which you generally practice.** Use your imaging skills to look around your practice environment:

- feel the deck under your feet
- see what is generally around you: walls, scenery, equipment.
- imagine yourself in your suit, cap and goggles.

What are some other things you can incorporate into this image from where you practice?

- a.
- b.

**2. Incorporate some movement.** "Feel" yourself:

- walking around the deck
- doing some warm-up stretches.

Other movements common in your sport?

- a.
- b.

**3. Image yourself performing a skill in your sport.** Start with a specific stroke drill. Imagine yourself swimming the drill correctly. Progress to imaging swimming each of the strokes in practice.

Some skills in your sport you need to focus on? (I.e., starts, turns, rotation)

- a.
- b.

What was easy and what was hard to image? Did you have a hard time using one sense or another? Could you see some things and not others? You'll want to practice more the images that were harder to create.

**Imagery Exercise 3: Competitive Situation Imagery**

After mastering the exercises on the previous page, you may find that you experience more “real life” emotion if you imagine yourself in a competitive situation.

**1. Approach a place, through imagery, where you have recently competed** or have vivid memories of a competition. Allow yourself to experience the sensations that may accompany a competitive experience for you--that is, if you typically get nervous or psyched up before competitions, allow yourself to feel those emotions.

List some typical emotions or feelings that you experience before competing:

a.

b.

**2. Imagine yourself at varying times before competition,** making it as real and vivid as possible. If you typically have a pre-competition routine, imagine yourself following the steps of that routine up to the point where you are competing. Remember to use all your senses.

Write down in the space below what you typically do before competition:

**3. Competition time:** imagine yourself in an actual competition situation, doing what you would typically do, with your typical emotional and physical reactions.

At the beginning and throughout competition, **I feel:**

At the beginning and throughout competition, **I do:**

At the beginning and throughout competition, **I think:**

At the beginning and throughout competition, **I see:**

***Imagery Exercise 4: Controlling Outcome***

The key to imagery as a performance enhancement tool is not just to make vivid images, but ones that **you** can control--making happen what you want to have happen.

Go back to Exercise #3, but decide beforehand how you **want** to be feeling and saying to yourself before you approach that competition site. Repeat each step, but with the addition of changes that reflect those changed thoughts and feelings.

**1. Approach a place, through imagery, where you have recently competed or have vivid memories of a competition.**

How I **want** to be feeling:

What I **want** to be saying to myself:

**2. Imagine yourself at varying times before competition.**

How I **want** to be feeling:

What I **want** to be saying to myself:

**3. During competition:**

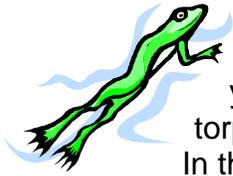
How I **want** to be feeling:

What I **want** to be saying to myself:

If this is a difficult change to make, you may find yourself lapsing back to images of what typically happens rather than what you wanted to happen. If this happens, "rewind" or repeat the image experience until you are able to control it. It is counterproductive to image scenes that you cannot control or that lead to undesirable outcomes.



**Exercise 6: Act Like...**



Often times imagining a specific image (object, animal, person) can aid in your creation of images. You've probably heard your swim coach say something like "Streamline like a torpedo off the wall" or "Kick your legs like a frog in breaststroke." In the following space provided pick a skill you are working on in practice and choose an image to pair with that skill.



Skill:

Image:

How this image will help:

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Skill:

Image:

How this image will help:

---

---

---

Skill:

Image:

How this image will help:

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## Sample Imagery Script for Swimming Race Simulation

(100 meter freestyle race...you may adapt this as needed for other events)

As you enter the pool, you immediately recognize the familiar smell of the chlorine...You scan the scene...taking in the overall layout of the pool deck and it's inhabitants...You notice the sounds of the pool...the coaches and the swimmers talking...the sound of the water splashing...the periodic beep of the start, as other heats go off before you.

You imagine yourself getting ready for the race...getting into your suit...spending some time stretching...and going over last minute details in your head...This is your best race...you're well prepared for this event and you are feeling mentally strong...

The official calls your event...Imagine yourself on the blocks...the starter commands "take your marks"... you bend down into the starting position... At the sound of the beep you take off...A strong powerful dive into the water...neat, clean and streamlined...a powerful kick to propel you to the surface...As you surface you begin strong beautiful strokes...You feel the water slipping off your skin...the sound of the water splashing as you move quickly through the water.

Each stroke you begin to feel stronger and stronger...moving through the water with speed...You notice another swimmer near you...you put him out of your mind ...and strive to race your own race...Even more you concentrate on each stroke... as you approach the first turn...You come to the wall quickly...start the turn... throw your legs over your head ...and push off hard into a tight streamline...You take several quick kicks and again surface...attacking the second half of your race.

As you begin your swim home, you are still feeling very strong...you've trained all year for this race and it feels great...stroke after stroke you propel yourself forward...with about 35 meters to go, you kick it into over drive...more on the legs...faster...faster...As you pull towards the finish...you feel your speed increasing...You are completely focused on your stroke...your breathing...you are doing everything as it should be done...with poise and purpose...With each stroke you dig into your reserves...pushing yourself above and beyond your expectations...Pulling, propelling...surging forward...you move yourself forward...put your head down and lunge towards the wall.

You immediately look up at the scoreboard...a best time...and a win on top of that...You slowly begin to regain awareness, colors come into focus, you hear the roar of the crowd...you realize you've achieved your goal...you get out of the pool and dry yourself off...you become aware of the feelings of excitement and accomplishment...pride builds inside you...you have succeeded...you are a great swimmer.

## How to Track Your Imagery Skill Improvement

There are a number of ways to measure your imagery skill development. The most basic is to track the time you practice each day. As described in Chapter 1, keeping logbooks of both practice and competition are important, add a section for imagery to your workout/competition logbook.

Another possibility for tracking your improvement include seeing how long you can consistently hold an image, by timing yourself throughout an imagery session. Imagery takes a lot of concentration, and you may find that you cannot hold an image for very long at first, but you can develop this part of your skill with consistent effort.

Good luck!!!

If at any time the formatting does not come up correctly, please email us and we will send a copy of any chapter as an attachment.

