

Lachlan Tighe.....Talking tactically

Lawnbowls com.au/weeklycolumn

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'Winning Gold: a measure of coaching performance')

CHAPTER EIGHT MENTAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN TRAINING

Storytime

How simple is mental skill really?

Bryce Stewart, an international bowls representative, told a group of coaches way back in 1999 that his team would always beat the opposition if they reminded themselves to deliver twice as many bowls as the opposition in the event.

What's that !!!

Yes you read correctly. Bryce was saying you see your (perfect) delivery before you physically deliver. So, in a competition where you physically deliver 50 bowls he would have you know you saw 100 deliveries go down in that event.

And the fancy term for this is visualisation, and, it is an essential mental skill. Bryce would die laughing to think he is an 'academic' but he is a thinker, pity more don't listen to him.

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Mental skills and sports psychology are terms that tend to mystify bowlers.

As a coach, I have a generic understanding of the principles, applications and value of mental skills to enhance the bowlers keenness to succeed at elite level competition.

I coach people. They happen to compete at bowls and (some) want to work to excel. I therefore use professionals in sports science to complement my role in coaching. Three experts who have been invaluable to my progress are Steve Christensen, in Queensland, and Craig Fox and Neil Barras, both here in Melbourne. You keen bowlers or coaches need to find your experts in the region where you play and live.

So why don't I start this chapter out on an easy 'what is it' explanation by listing many of the words that equate within a mental skill inventory.

*March is chosen as the month for 'Elbows' to review and reset goals to coincide with season finish, National championships, national squads selection and Games
15/3/2006*

Mental Skills Inventory:

description

Player Rating Coach rating

annual calendar

bocce

Breathing

Calls – ML & MW

Caterpillar

Composure

Coping (with pressure)

control of factors

Concentration span

Concentration focus

communicating

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commitment
challenging
decision making
distraction control
emotional intelligence (thinking hard)
Game plan
Game performance analysis
Goal setting
Goal monitoring
Imagery
Judging distance / length estimates
Meditation
motivation
'pb' recording of games
'pb' recall
positive
process
Pre delivery routine
Rituals
Rehearsal
Relaxation
Segment a game for analysis
self talk practice
sensory awareness
Skill recording
Training performance analysis
visualisation
Walking to a head

This list is in a table so you, and your coach, can rate your knowledge, skill rating and application. And let's be frank, the game of playing bowls is relatively easy; the success to winning bowls is more often than not due to the skill available 'above the shoulders' – the mental and tactical skills.

Please let me describe these in house terms Bocce, Caterpillar, 'pb', ML MW calls Bocce – using that sport scoring system for bowls so continue to successively bowl until you are shot

Caterpillar – each of your deliveries to rest on the first or previous delivery (consistency)

'pb' – an athletics term for assessing your (best recorded) draw bowl measure in competition

ML – means a mat length distance as a call

MW – means a mat width distance as a call.

50 Days, 50 quotes in 2002

In Chapters 10-12 of this book, you will see I refer to greats of sport supporting Malaysia's bowlers.

What I did in fact 50 days out from the 2002 Commonwealth Games was have a quote a day on the entrance door of our meeting room which we used daily. To commence the training sessions.

And every daily handout had the same theme typed at the top to start the day.

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And each day one player and a coach had to give their interpretation of the theme (truism) as it applied to them. No one was allowed not to express a view.

The purpose was to have the players and coaches constantly dream of success, to have reinforcement of their goals with messages from other successful sporting identities.

It was meant to reinforce the pursuit of their own goal. And having fellow squad members express a view gave a sense of first hand reinforcement, and, a sense of belonging to a team committed.

In preceding chapters I detailed insights and practices I applied in Malaysia which included team objectives and segmentation for the Games 2002.

It has to be remembered that ranting on about great player or team qualities, commitment, etc, has to take account of the group of individuals and that human beings make mistakes, make promises they cannot deliver, hope rather than work for success, etc.

All I ever do is foster a culture and an environment that permits the player to aspire to achieve their own 'pb' level, despite all the external influences that require them to acquire the (few) medals on offer at Games.

No doubt the Malaysian medallists were in the top bracket of people with highly tuned mental skills.

But in a team game there will be (some) others with an equally high level of mental skill and strength though these people are 'burdened' with lower mortals. That's the beauty of team sport – motoring along at the pace of the slowest member of the team.

Here then are a few examples of mine that I tried to engage and foster mental skills as a vital string to our bow.

Whenever I saw players not doing any of this at training, I would bring the video to them to reinforce the visual and the intended message of mental skill and toughness.

Composure and Coping

I regularly set up training sessions where a player(s) were behind with a limited number of ends to play and they were behind on the scoreboard. The intention was simple, plan how to win and cope with the situation.

Sometimes I had a team given the jack though they were say had a score of 8-11 and 6 more ends to play and observe how they set about winning (conversely I watched and observed how the winning team set out to maintain their advantage).

What I watched out for was the behaviour of every member of the teams to see what level of coping was obvious to me, the spectator.

A catchphrase I used was
Lose your temper
Your team
Your plan
Your game
Your mental skill

What I wanted to explore after every one of these 6 end sessions was the degree of application the players could develop to cope with supposed pressure.

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Pressure: really what is it?

Ask a variety of players, and spectators for that matter, and sure enough you will get numerous answers.

For example Malaysia's male singles player, Syed, described his pressure in competitive situations when neither of his first two deliveries ended within the head.

So how do you train for that situation as it will arise in competition because that is how he first felt pressure ?.

My remedy was to only allow Syed to have 2 bowls and play a game against an opponent with 4 bowls in training.

Some of the times the opponent was allowed to walk up and place 2 of his bowls in the head close to the jack further heightening the emphasis on the bowl deliveries still playable. The object was

- to familiarise the singles player with a situation wherein he was in defence mode being 2 shots down to start
- to enable him to realize he still had control (and skill) to deliver two more bowls to impact on the score
- to use these training sessions so as to take the 'recall button' into competition whenever a familiar situation arises to that in which we trained and prepared for such an event.

And I videoed all this to reinforce the singles player's control of mind and emotion was actually with the deliveries he still had in his hand ready to deliver.

I read a great book recently 'Death Sentence: the death of public language' by Don Watson which is a book totally unrelated to bowls or sport for that matter, but one sentence he described hit me.

His book describes the use of language and how words are the valuable tool, more so than grammar. I liked his focus on words as a reflection of our imagination, like good coaching. I especially reacted to his use of the word pressure, familiar to all of us in sport.

Watson spoke of 'being under pressure' and suggested it should read..'being under siege'. I saw the value of his word as it applied to pressure – should we not say we '..face pressure' rather than ' being under pressure'

What a revelation in the more appropriate use of a word- replace 'under' with 'face' and you exude a whole different mindset. 'Under' implies losing or lost to me, weighed down; whereas 'facing' gives me an impression of standing at the same height as the perceived pressure; generally don't we all feel we face all things better if we face them head on.

So next time choose under siege when the proverbial is really hitting that fan, otherwise look out, and, there facing you eyeball to eyeball is , you guessed it, pressure.

Invite 'him' in why don't you and enjoy the challenge.

Concentration and focus: a skill, an art and a science

Orlick, in his excellent book, described how athletes focus.

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Many an author and speaker has stated similar comment to his that ‘...best performances occur when an athlete is totally connected / rivetted to their performance so as to be on autopilot, even robotic’...;

as a bowler or one coaching an elite bowler you must discover what focus works for you and in what circumstances.. ;

in bowls it may mean tuning into your body, the lunge forward the knee bending, hand outstretched smooth gazelle like step forward rising like the phoenix to watch the ball bound for glory...;

of being aware of the key feelings that accompany your exhilarating body moves when the delivery is executed flawlessly- that is really when you are tuned in to know those senses; ...the practice and training of focusing for bowls involves stringent learning to stay connected to what you are doing, to your body and its feelings.

It could be to improve your capability to focus, you should train by use of these guidelines

- Feel the execution of the delivery, (mental) image your delivery then naturally execute the shot
- Train by being totally connected to your body movement when bowling
- Be aware of everything via your peripheral vision then, blinker your visual focus
- Try to recreate the mental / physical condition to experience the feelings of your ‘pb’
- Use cues / red alerts as some form of aid so as to enter or re-enter that focussed state; a red alert is like the red light signal in your mind prompting you when straying
- Practice the length of time of that focus (pre delivery, delivery, follow through actions) to have your focus and attention span stay for a longer period through this training

Your goal as a bowler, and especially an elite bowler, is to deliver the perfect (weighted) bowl requiring you to focus totally on the entire grass line pathway.

So in this focus state you could be in any given green in the world as each delivery is a separate perfect process where focus / concentration is for the short but intense period of the delivery movement.

The time in between deliveries should always be one for relaxation. A time where tension in both muscular and mental is removed, or reduced, to enable the preparation for the next delivery, a delivery that is to be perfectly executed.

All elite athletes / bowlers are human and affected by worry, distractors, loss of focus, results oriented concern.

It is important for bowlers to understand that what we seek is a relaxed focus, i.e. not lacking in intensity, more about the mind being trained to be cleared of irrelevancies, distractions and tensions. The focus is centred or blinkered; zoning in on the location of importance for execution of the bowling delivery.

Focus and concentration are part of your mental skill inventory and that requires training so try examples such as

- Clock in a microwave – turn it on for 60 seconds and watch that clock constantly for the 60 seconds
- Sit quietly let self relax and focus on something for a set period
- And sit now listen totally to something – a bird, heartbeat
- Peripheral v. specific – line up a few objects soaking up each then all then begin to narrow the focus onto one object (use the room you are in now while reading)
- Thought selection – focus on a set thought then allow mind to wander then refocus on specific target (if you are like me having a wandering mind should not be too difficult)

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- Seek the feel (sensory) which for me is the term ‘soft hands’, if the feel is right the ball will end in the zone (where I am asking players how does it feel)
- Training – voice how it feels, close the eyes to sense the feel; one of the young gun bowlers from Wales told me of his approach of watching the first ball then eyes closed for the delivery of the rest
- When feeling stressed (e.g. proceeding toward losing the game mid way through the event) slow down, see and sense the calming feeling, talk more, stretch, breath slowly
- Upon making an error in training stop, shift your focus to what you will do well for the next execution (obviously if the error is repetitive, retrieve and execute correctly as this is the training session purpose)
- Use cues that mean something to you – examples I am aware of for two players are the expressions soft hands and 009, which for these two people mean senses and enjoyment
- Enjoy – and if not leave it this time to return at another time
- The worlds best achieve their best results when they focus only on their performance and not on the result outcome
- Remind yourself of your training quality
- Debrief every event and performance evaluation record

In their excellent book on bowls, de Lacy and Belliss say ‘...you can improve focus through practice’.

No, the only way to improve focus is to train yourself to acquire this skill and practice it. Similarly concentration can be learnt.

And the way it is done is via organised training under coach supervision.

Salter in his bowls book also wrote about Focus. He wrote ‘..Although events may be beyond your control reactions to events are entirely controlled by you. Develop a focus plan, practice it when in training, and when distracted’

Simulating the anticipated distraction as part of the training session is the best method of learning to cope as it is called relevant experience.

Focus requirements can be enhanced easily in lawn bowls as every position in the team requires attention to focus on different skills and roles and therein different cues

Two of the ways I explored with the Malaysian bowls squad was
job descriptions for every playing position,
Game plans of a generic nature and for each event format
These were easy to detail and need not be exhaustive. If there is too much information the player loses a degree of autonomy which is self defeating.

As recently as February 2006, I revised those earlier player position descriptions to be specific to the new sets play formats. These documents were then distributed to the Malaysian national team, the Victorian state ladies team and my ‘Elbows’ squad.

I suggest you read the two previous chapters on this web site on Game plans and Tactical skill to get a glimpse of what I refer to here.

We hear bowls like most elite level sport is 95 % between the ears (or above the shoulders). I often invoke the phrase...thinking hard or hardly thinking (which I have seen written in volleyball and squash coaching journals) but if it is 95% of the game of lawn bowls lets see the serious bowlers and their coach spend ample time training to perfect that ‘above shoulder’ skill.

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Distraction control: a form of focus
(i)Control and Uncontrollable

It has been mentioned the mental skill distinguishing the champ from the elite is their ability to adapt and refocus in the face of distraction (Orlick ch 10)

TV at the Games 2002

Talking to one of the players as part of the debrief of the Games 2002 I was intrigued to hear her say that being on live television on consecutive games distracted her. Initially each team was to be televised when they played England. However the Malaysians being such entertainers were on consecutive days because they were media friendly.

Who would expect this to be a hindrance. Well in future I suggest we now know to expect it, and, to prepare for it accordingly in lead up events.

Parents and players

One player I work with had a fall out with dad and his reaction as a prank was to put the player's bowls shoes in the bath tub of water just prior to that players state title final.

Guess what !!! The player lost the game as the shoes this player borrowed at short notice were a size too small.

Who would expect this circumstance to occur and thus be a hindrance!!!

The answer to both is maybe I should have both times and planned better for such unusual eventualities.

In another example, young Lee Schraner was telling me about an RVBA umpire telling him That the playing time of his game was far too long, thus illegal(wrong) and unsportsmanlike(wrong) yet this young talented bowler has to continue the next round with this negativity and doubt surrounding him

As well, I need to work harder to have the players I coach able to contend with such circumstances.

If you want to perform well consistently in training and major events you must develop the mental skill of distraction control and that is done in practice, at training, integrated and organised by the bowls coach.

The three examples above exemplify how distractions come from unexpected sources and quarters – family, relationships, team members, TV, coaches, equipment, officials, sponsors, etc

Bah and running with Shima

Bowlers reading this next section may well be confounded by what I am going to write. Though for many of you who have seen the Malaysians play in Australia since March 2005 will have seen this episode in action.

However I remind you I am talking to you about the need to develop, to enhance mental skills.

In Malaysia, one particular player, lovely a person as she was, had a tendency to lapse in concentration – don't we all.

But you may not be an elite international bowler. These players are elite players.

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So to overcome this concentration lapse, I had the lead and second train to go up the green to the head with, and when the third (who I refer to as the vice skip) chose to proceed; the first two players had to focus on their vice skip team mate and be shoulder to shoulder with her as a trio going to the head.

Whenever I did not see that happening on the training track, I would intrude and tell both players concerned AND the vice skip to refocus as it was an important tool for concentration, and a display of team harmony.

I wanted them to train to develop self / team confidence too and this was my approach. With great glee, these past weeks in 2006 I have seen lady bowlers from Glen Waverley, Burwood and the state ladies all jogging up to the head together to join their skip. Well done all !

Distractions are an ongoing part of sporting life though bowlers beware – you don't lose your performance skills because of distractions: you lose the necessary level of focus that allows you to perform and execute the skills effectively.

Most distractions are of a temporary nature so console yourself and consider these possible solutions to use

- Believe you will perform at full capacity
- Commit yourself to remaining positive
- Expect the unexpected

(ii) List of controllables in Competition

Look at the list below and soak up what it is that you truly have control over in competition (and in training). Why then are you distraught about these factors, you do control them:

Level of distractions
Delivery
Thoughts
Emotions
Mat use to determine playing length
mat use as part of routine / ritual
Technique
Arousal
Negatives
Positives
Standard of play
(influence) on teammates
verbal behaviour
non verbal behaviour
misconceptions / interpretations
monitor / measure skill and performance
Plans,
pre match routines,
mental preparation
game preparation
equipment, apparel,

(iii) List of Uncontrollables in Competition

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Now lets read a list of the factors that you have little or minimal influence over in competition (and again in training). What you can do is develop the skill to be able to easily contend with the emergence of these factors at training sessions and in competition. The more you cope with them the better your mental skill (development).

distractions
opponent
weather
pace of green
location of competition
club environment
others' attitude
others' verbals and non verbals
choice of teammate(s)

Training to Refocus

One way you may be able to refocus is to recall a 'monstrous distraction' that successfully interfered in your performance either at training or at a game(this is good imagery training in itself).

Recall the incident, the undesired reaction from you, the unwanted response or outcome.

Now recall and train to respond more effectively in hindsight; this is another skill – tactical skill via match analysis debrief and review sessions.

You have simulated the desirable solution in this instance and now use the lesson, apply the skill and that will be the next time something STARTS to go wrong, have your 'red alert' mechanism apply to yourself; it could be a negative comment, a missed execution, a poor decision made, excess thinking rather than intuitive action, game plan flop, all signalling a loss of focus – challenge yourself there and then - can you stop and turn it around.

Set a goal, one of those daily / weekly goals to reassess your progress.

Goals, Goals Setting

I regard this aspect of player / coach preparation so important that I have set Chapter Five aside to provide an insight as to how players and coaches can, or should, set a range of goals and monitor progress for that sole purpose of gauging progress and providing motivation to keep going in pursuit of excellence.

Imagery

Imagery as a mental skill and tool is a concept foreign to bowls and bowlers and even if it is referred to in some (elite) bowls circles is rarely talked about, understood or used in lawn bowls for developing players.

Using mental imagery opens up numerous situations for bowlers.

I giggle at some bowlers imagination when I have shared the same green with them in a competition but wonder who is on which 'grass' when the stories are retold of the day of competition.

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Simply some of us already have vivid imagination (go to any bowls club to verify the levels of imagination) so why not use it, not to embellish 'truth and performance' but to prepare you for the big day.

So often I have read where the best athletes in the world of sport are users of mental imagery. It is used daily as a way of directing training and preparing for the competition.

Imagery can allow you to draw on all your senses (hearing, sight sound etc) to experience the moment in competition including coping with bad moments.

Not only can you use it for 'pb' but for coping when 'worst nightmares' befall your imagery. And for that matter recalling the image of the 'pb' is invaluable if actual physical training time has been limited.

What imagery should do when functioning is mentally program a positive performance mentally to allow your body to follow suit. It should enhance self confidence knowing you had a recall of a 'pb' performance.

Sounds good, sounds simple but how do I develop it ?

Like all the other skills by starting the process, training, applying, programming, acquiring, assessing, repeating the competency to get to each new level.

However right now you are saying to yourself, heck what do I do – my ideal world has you accessing a coach who knows about this technique or you access a coach who accesses a sports psychologist, who then conducts training in this mental skill.

This is what Innovation is for me as a coach.

Either a coach with the skill, or, another sports science specialist who helps the bowler take you as far as you can imagine you want to go in the competitive aspect of the sport.

But back to the simple things in application of imagery. It could be you image the club / green you train at so imaginewhat does it look like, picture it, now smell it and what comes to your nostrils, and now that feeling as you walk in the gates or even when walking up and down a rink on the playing surface, what you always do in a warm up (nothing !!!) , the feel when you touch the bowl.

I use to say to the Malaysians, especially one of the national team ladies, you should love your bowl, you should know its every feature as it delivers all your success and fulfills your dreams; or a mat that is there at the club.

Now extend that to sense the image of your actual training.

Experts tend to write that we should try and practice quality imagery for up to 15 minutes every day. If you are just starting this process, lead in gradually - go 3 minutes daily for a month, 5 minutes the next month so within 3-4 months you are at their 15 minute level.

One way of feeling as if this training has practical application is to do the relevant bowl delivery action, either with eyes closed , in front of a mirror, or on a sunny day out in the backyard or on the bowls green placing yourself so the shadow cast by the sun is likened to a mirror.

You are trying to experience the image(ry) using all the senses so imagery as a tool and skill is beyond the use of sight only. As you train for this skill and progress in your level of

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learning you may find it helpful to observe others, either those who are perfect technicians or even those bowls with defective delivery techniques.

Next time at the green after your own progress in imagery skill watch a person on your rink for transfer of image. Generally if it is a very good technique you could even try to feel yourself doing it exactly as they are performing the delivery.

It is recognised that there are athletes so capable of imagery skill, they are able to evaluate their performance and pin point the area in need of improvement.

It seems they do this by replaying the competition just pre and during so as to identify the focus when it was ...all happening, identify the distraction that caused the loss in focus and the time and timing of that in the event.

What this leads to is an important evaluation of how you are thinking in phases of the competition and thus training to perfect and overcome that time span of focus tune out.

Mental imagery can allow you to pre- practice for the event so as to enter a competition with the feeling that I've been here before, this is familiar , this is comfortable, this I can handle

For instance, I coach Jessie who being an athletic tall and talented young lady of 21 years is into fitness (and other active sport). We talked about her extension of arms, legs, body and we agreed that her self image is aptly described as ...Tai Chi....for us that sensory image of people gracefully, fluid, slowly extending their arms connected to their body – guess what that graceful movement for Jess encompasses: a sense of relaxation, a truly apt image to transfer into her 'portrait of herself as a bowler'.

Interestingly I used to describe Lina as the artist – all grace, lithe of limb and fluent in motion.
I wanted them both to imagine themselves as bowlers.

I recall one Saturday session conducted at the venue for Jessie held in preparation the day before the Victorian State titles, and I had the club skipper join us whereupon we prepared a training session on rink Five with a particular scenario in mind.

The next day in the title event on that very rink that exact scenario became a reality.

After the game and a win, Jess said to me excitedly '...did you see what I did in that end, it was the same set up as yesterday ?'

She recalled the image, the recall of the training, the application and not unsurprisingly the outcome she knew was liable to occur – bingo 3 shots to her, thank you very much.

Likewise we did driving practice on the Saturday and next day in the final that situation arose, Jess did a memory recall, imagining that successful drive training drill, and the outcome was not an unexpected one for either of us.

Then in preparing for a BIG event you can imagine yourself at the competition saying positive things to yourself, relaxing and knowing how you relax, overcoming and contending (generally) with the obstacles.

For all this exemplary tales of success, don't assume everything will always turn out well.

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One situation I experienced was a parent damaging the bowlers shoes just prior to a title event. Hence the player had to compete in borrowed and different size shoes. Now that really tests the mental skill. And the pre game preparation.

Another situation in a pairs national event one of the players turned and sought me out on the bank and said ‘...its not fair coach’ with 4 ends to play in the event and only 3 shots off the pace. The player was struggling to cope with the wet and windy, thus unreliable conditions.

If that player had stuck to the task and imagined previous success on wet days of play, they may have persisted and won as the opposition duly dropped 4 shots in the final two ends of play.

Suffice to say my player imagined all the worst things that can happen.

Intensity

This is how I view Intensity. It is

- not tuning out for a second when it is time to be tuned in.
- not screaming out encouragement to fellow teammates 3 rinks across the green from you.
- not watching the result of a delivery on the adjacent rink.
- not keeping stony cold silent in case talking might be construed as lapse in concentration.
- is restricted to the brief period of time covering pre delivery routine,
- visualisation of the shot to be delivered, delivery movement, and conclusion of follow through.
- All up that may take 30 seconds.
- All other time in the game is allocated to a lowered intensity of focus through to total relaxation of mind and body to energise yourself for the next bowl you are required to deliver.
- not altered from delivery to delivery due to pressure of the score. The process of delivery should be automatic and the same each time – a reflection of the process of delivery not an indication of the score or result
- also reflected in the commitment by a player to winning, regardless of the situation

I have two interesting examples of that last dot point

First was the Malaysian fours skip, Haslah, while already winning convincingly 22-6 and with one bowl in the game to play, and she still walks to the head to see how she can maximize the win for this final end. I saw in her the element of warrior desperation necessary to succeed on the international stage.

The second example occurred in late 2003 with ‘Grizzly’ O’Meagher down 11-17 at Burwood, one end to play, last team out on the green.

He enabled the game to extend for 5 dead ends so as to give his team the slim opportunity to secure a 6+ to win the game, regardless of the views of all others concerned.

I gave a talk late 2004 at Burwood and mentioned this episode. The club members recalled the episode and stated that as organisers they were peeved at the time for the delay in the tournament.

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I questioned their understanding of what mindset is required to excel at any sport, bowls included. I am not altogether convinced the members generally understand that mindset, though a few of the really good bowlers knew what I was conveying as an elite level approach.

Might I say since then, the Burwood members have opted to develop a better approach and have shared many of their new approaches with me. In 2006 Malaysia has used that club as a training venue in recognition of an environment that is pursuing an improved approach to better bowling.

Positive: Self Talk

Scott was my immediate pairs opponent in the final of a premier league club championships.

A very quiet young man, Scott is identified as a prospect in bowls.

I saw him in a predatory sense, our team as a hunter looking at him, the prey.

Physically he moved back into the background at the bowls head, only reinforcing for me that feeling of our team superiority. However it was their team's final delivery that convinced me of the necessity for mental and tactical training.

Scott's skip had just played a superb delivery within a measure of being shot.

Scott comment to his skip was hesitant and negative; along the line of they being down and don't be short with the next delivery.

No indication was given of how good the prior delivery was, how little or much to alter and no concern if added weight in the delivery was to occur.

Sure enough the delivery was just short and the final championship was lost.

Where had the verbal advice been to ensure no danger was to occur if added weight was given to the delivery. The player simply repeated what he had learnt in practice. Most bowlers would do the same as they do not have an understanding of the trained mental skill.

What I watch for and then train players in is their relevant and positive verbal language or the intonation.

I am watchful at training of any glances and facial gestures that transmit worry, undue nervousness and work with the players to be aware of these factors and to prepare them to be alert to their negative application in events.

Walking off green seems to be the latest indication that negativity is creeping into a bowlers mind.

Our Aussie bowlers and many a young gun bowler have walked off the green mid game to display their mood to those viewing the game, pertinently that includes the opposition if they are alert.

Since 2003 I have noted national and international players commit this error in judgement – walking off the green to converse or curse, in some cases, alongside spectators – especially if the opponent has had a degree of luck (where possibly we all curse).

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Now since mid 2005 we see Aussie squad members walk off the green in a game to talk with the coaches. Why !!!

What these players forget is that they may have contributed to the opponent's luck by their own decisions thus enabling this opponent to access the luck. I can think of too many situations involving elite players where players lost, and, in some small way, it reflected their level of distraction by their foray into the crowd. And of late the distraction of coaching 'input' mid game.

Be careful not to read too much into the language coming from the other end as this is a lesson in communication. It is resolved by a game plan that includes segmentation where a meeting after a certain no of ends is scheduled to enable players to exchange views and reinforce what each of them has agreed to do.

Relaxation

Learning to relax is a skill. Do you possess that skill, champion athletes do ?

Where does that leave you as an elite bowler ?

My reading about relaxation, quoting Orlick for example, is that two things appear to happen when relaxation takes effect. Physiologically your heart slows down, breathing slows and is more regular, there is decreased oxygen consumption, muscles tend to be less tense and probably there is a calmness easing into your body.

Now psychologically there is a shift in focus to something else away from what caused any tension; this focus may be a move in thinking, then other senses may also 'do their work' allowing you to hear, see, feel different things around you.

If any coping strategy you employ is to contend with stress it has to be one learnt and trained to be a competent skill (when you really need it).

My understanding for sports men (bowlers beware) is that relaxation clears the mind and relaxes the body in preparation for a quality performance; is useful pre competition to calm down and conserve energy; prepares body and mind for quality imagery.

A reminder – maintaining selective intensity is important especially in times such as finals where fatigue will set in. In said situation necessitating a refocus by the bowler, maybe on imaged quality performance – 'soft hands', extend, bend and follow through.

Craig Fox has been invaluable with my bowls squad members in training them to acquire these relaxation skills.

Rituals and routines : pre delivery and follow through

I nearly overlooked this section. Jessie asked me to conduct a training session for her the following day so I planned to get onto the computer to plan the program and fortunately did two things. Firstly I referred to the file I have of her and seemed to be surprised that I had nothing on her pre delivery routine.

A bit later that same day I was over watching the quarter finals of the Richmond Union Masters and one player, Brian, had the final delivery was 3 down on the head with the score 24 all. Well as I watched his jittery and uncertain disposition it struck me...oops that draft book has no information on routines and rituals, yet I have my squad describe them (in print) for their reference

Here are samples for your consideration. Think, view and write your own. The best players in sport have routines and rituals.

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Pre delivery Routines

Players who were prepared to verbalise their pre delivery routine do it differently, but, knowing what it is helps. Here are some samples

CH

1. Decide in your mind which shot is to be played
2. Visualise the shot to be played before getting on the mat
3. Say to myself “remember the process”
4. Take a deep breath
5. Aim Fixed foot on grass line
6. Parallel other foot to fixed foot
7. Line up Knees, Hips, Shoulders with grass line
8. Grip the bowl for the appropriate shot (LOCK & LOAD)
9. Take a deep breath
10. Commit the body to the right amount of weight
11. Relax and deliver

Attitude is about practicing

No one trains for second place

Its all about luck just ask any runnerup

Process Before Result

AH

1. Decide what shot to play
2. Place bowl in delivery hand-center finger in middle of bowl
3. Take big breath
4. Line and place right foot down delivery line on mat
5. Place left foot next to right
6. Rest body and concentrate on line (follow back from kitty the crown of my bowl and weight
7. Swing bowl down line several times (to make sure my arms are straight and usually tap pointer finger several times on bowl
8. Deliver bowl and follow through (breath in while arm going back and breath out on forward motion of arm swing
9. Try to stay down for 3 seconds with my eyes slowly going up to follow my bowl down the green
10. Stand up and cheer because I'm an ace!!!

CJ

1. Deep breath
2. Select and focus on the line and weight of the shot to be played
3. Step onto the mat in the direction of the selected line
4. Swing arm along selected line
5. Think of the weight required
6. Deep breath
7. Bend knees
8. Deliver

CM

1. Know the shot to be played
2. Stand one meter behind the mat
3. Clean the bowl
4. Choose the aiming point
5. Step the right foot on the mat on the chosen line

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6. Bring left foot forward-lock into the right foot
7. Balance posture
8. Square the shoulders
9. Choose the weight to be played
10. Practice swing
11. Confirm the weight
12. Deep breath
13. Deliver the ball
14. Follow through
15. Stay down for three seconds

Time: 18 seconds total (1-14)

LT

a) draw shot: use the roll up to collect knowledge

1. stand directly behind the mat to enable me to project an imaginary line from a chosen bank mark (peg)
2. and to visualize the shoulder and turn of my ball to the target on the rink line
3. and recall my knowledge of the flight path of my ball
4. take that one step onto the mat with my right foot aligned to the middle mat line and my left foot slightly in front of the right and both aiming out along the draw line
5. move the Bowl from the left hand to my right hand, checking the bias and tapping the running surface as a ritual to ensure it is correctly gripped
6. Visualize the entire flight path of the ball, and sense what my body feels like delivering that
7. decide on the weight, pendulum height for this delivery
8. breathe easily and noticeably and bounce a few times on the balls of my feet to sense the body and delivery action (my tiger spring)
9. Bend my knees to glide down as my first and important body movement
10. Deliver the ball with focus of eyes mind and body on that 'spot'

b) Where required to opt for deliveries other than the draw to rink line

1. make deliberate and focused decision on this required different delivery
2. consider the feet location on the mat to execute this different delivery if it is to differ to point 3 above
3. all other points above still apply

Factors Common to both a). and b).

1. Time taken for pre delivery (approx 10 secs)
2. Follow through : Stay down for three seconds after delivery watching bowl over spot and other cues
3. ease myself up to an erect stance and watch the ball like as sphinx, regardless of the outcome, until it finishes its flight path
4. mentally/ sensually soak up that flight information

ST

1. Foot alignment on grass line
2. Weight balance
3. Set pendulum / swing height
4. Focus
5. Bowl movement
6. Slow
7. Follow through

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BC

1. Bowl in left hand
2. Spin bowl in bowls cloth
3. Stand behind mat-approx: 3-4 feet
4. Walk to mat
5. Play shot

CD

1. Pick the exact shot I want to play
2. Stand on the mat
3. Place the bowl in my hand
4. Pick the line I want to play
5. Pick the length I want to play
6. Put the bowl over the line with the length I picked

Time: 10 seconds

GE

1. Visualize running of bowl from mat to jack
2. Step onto the mat with right foot with line of bowl
3. Place left foot 2 inch in front of right foot
4. Feet square to shoulders
5. Feel weight of bowl
6. Look up
7. Lift bowl to where to be delivered from (depending on weight)
8. Deliver

RG

1. Wipe down bowl (Visualizing shot to play)
2. Dry bowling hand
3. Take a breath, then step onto the mat
4. Check bias (twice)
5. Take another breath
6. In mind (say get the bowl out and up) Give it a chance basically
7. Then deliver

12 seconds

BL

1. Look at the surrounds
2. Pick up the bowl clean it straight away
3. Take my time
4. Place hand on bowl correctly
5. Place feet correctly on mat
6. Two practice swings
7. Be relaxed and balanced
8. Concentrate and focus on the line and length to play and release

Segmentation

Haslah was the Malaysian female player I dubbed the warrior, as she never knew how to concede in a contest.

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I interviewed every one of the fourteen players representing Malaysia the night before the start of the Games and sought a response as to what each one learnt from my time with them as coach.

‘Segmentation coach’ was the reply from this delightful Malaysian lady who in battle doubled as a warrior.

And well may you ask what segmentation is ???

Quite simply a notion borrowed from most ball sport team games. I have the players divide the game into approximately four or five segments. Hence an 18 end game would include 4 ends a segment for 16 ends and a 2 end segment to finish.

In 2006 with the format being sets play the segments will be of 3 ends.

The purpose is to allow the bowlers to monitor progress of the set game plan and the objectives of the segment. Simple really !

Sensory Intelligence

Like many people , I have read and heard about Emotional Intelligence.

What I want to push is a better application of the phrase ‘common sense’.

I will refer to it as Sensory Intelligence in that we players and coaches should use our brains and link it with our eyes, ears and touch so that the cranium is playing bowls with the rest of our body.

It is about understanding how we react to positive and negative stimuli for the level of support we need to enjoy our next challenge.

It is exemplified in why we do not compliment the opponent – why feed them to victory. A word of explanation -that approach is not to be interpreted to mean we have no respect for the opposition.

Respect is a byword of how you always approach any opponent, at any level.

Thinking hard, not hardly thinking

I go into greater detail in the relevant chapter on Tactical skills, however let me briefly introduce the topic as follows:

- In teams, refrain from indicating negative scores/ calls so simply stating that...we are down ...is ample prior to specifying the direction of a delivery
 - Concentration, visualization, composure: practiced habits,
 - success: lead & second must be strong and support one another
 - Segment the game: do not wait until it is too late – agree which ends for meetings
 - “Seeing is believing” be “switched on” – you must alter strategy as it is too late in the last end to do something miraculous, use team meeting for this reason
 - Greed can cost: maintain shots up, keep losses to a minimum

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- (bad) decisions by skips can cost: think of the team not yourself
 - Positive under pressure, ***lose*** your temper and you lose your team, lose your game plan, lose your mental approach and lose the game
 - Medium represents mediocrity: play MIN/MAX length
 - Tactics: bowls in the head build the foundation - like constructing a building
 - Practice habits: recall what you do well
 - Practice habits: recall what your team mate does well to help them
 - Practice habits: satu, dua, tiga etc and the knee touching
 - Pressure – there is none only in the mind... relax, compete, fight
 - Motivation: when we are not winning, or know we cannot win, we set new short term goals so we can fight better another day
 - Changing hands: NO bowl is ever in your way (we train that way)
 - ***ENJOY*** - and do your best
-
- devise and use a 2 end roll up checklist
 - return to the basics if / when you become anxious or sloppy in standard
 - avoid lapses by concentrating positively on the very next delivery
 - be aware of the times/ situations where you could lose concentration in an event
 - pace yourself mentally / emotionally throughout the match

Simulation

It has been demonstrated in sport generally that simulation training can help a bowler prepare to more effectively meet the challenges you expect to face in competition.

Simulation helps the bowler

- Prepare physically through quality intensity training reflecting the actual event (how recently was I asked why do bowlers who burn on the track go to water on the green)
- Prepare mentally for competition and the physical / emotional condition prevailing in competition
- To be able to stay focussed despite the demands of competition

Note however we are not advocating an intensity of training daily – periodisation of training is so important; it is a balance of having quality / intense training to replicate elite competition, rest is also essential.

In fact, a sense of enjoyment is necessary as the other ingredient in that mix.

The bowler needs to be rested to get the best from themselves in major simulations and major competitions.

It is unfortunate that elite bowlers perform poorly in competition because of unforeseen circumstances that could easily be replicated. So adverse / unforeseen conditions can be better met and overcome if these were simulated in practice

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Over a period from 2000 to 2006 I have observed Aussie squad members bemoan the greens they were due to play or train on and perform accordingly from venues such as Hawthorn, Heaton Hall in Manchester, Darebin since 2004 to 2006 as the Games 2006 venue.

Simulating the physical conditions has to enhance practising the mental and tactical conditions. Pre the Games 2002 the Australian sides went to England and then back to Hawthorn to prepare for the contest in Manchester.

However the sessions lasted little more than an hour any particular day as players were frustrated by the sub standard playing surfaces.

That was the whole point of the exercise, hello !!! Rob as national coach would look to the heavens in search of guidance as he and I seemed to be the only ones aware of the need to persist.

All the more reason for their training to include mental and tactical skill components of training as the simulation has to include the anticipated emotional and mental state you find yourself in when supposedly adverse conditions prevail. Outcome at Manchester, Australia placed seventh in the Games.

Example - Malaysians in Scotland – hand warmers, cloths, pullovers

Malaysians were no different.

Though a trip to Scotland was used to simulate the contrasting climactic conditions and discover what it was that they found difficult to deal with – not surprisingly the cool to cold weather and the dietary restrictions Malaysians adhere to.

We discovered the need for hand warmers, heat beads, numerous bowls cloths, jumpers, food and supplement supplies and the need to have them acclimatise to the expected English conditions so similar to Scotland.

Every one of the nine days in Scotland we trained and later on at afternoon or evening we competed in sultry conditions so as to prepare as best we could for the Games 2002.

Example - Malaysians in Manchester – final training session on one rink.

Performing under simulated adverse conditions reinforce that you can do well in all circumstances. Merely by foreseeing planning and applying to the probable problems you enter them with a heightened degree of confidence due to familiarity you know what you are now capable of doing.

Conversely introduce the expected too, such as warm ups, rent a crowd, noise, and do it rain , hail or shine and at differing times of the day – so in KL we prepared for competition by scheduling event training at night so we simulated the competition times.

In some cases it is important to stretch the simulation e.g. a game is played for an hour so simulate the training session for 75 minutes so as to extend the quality / intensity period. In bowls we have to investigate the programs that best simulate a game

Simulate, emulate but don't leave it too late

Before I forget to mention that the value of games simulation is the chance to set up mental simulation (coping skill) training too.

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The mental simulation allows you to prepare for and practice various responses to discover the ones that work, are effective, in your mind before you actually confront the event factor. Notice it can be part of the mental imagery innovation I refer to elsewhere in the book.

Following positive examples of others is a variation on simulation, i.e. replicate the role model approach and attributes.

Look at and selectively draw on other mentor / role models to better yourself, physically mentally and tactically.

And that does'nt stop you from viewing the 'worse nightmare' type – definitely ensure you learn from them and not emulate a person whose behaviour is unacceptable and not likely in achieving success.

If you want to soar like an eagle then don't mix with the turkeys.

So in sighting a technique behaviour etc say to yourself I am definitely not going to be like that, perform like that, or act like that.

Case Study – Indonesia Badminton

Indonesian superstars work with the most promising u.25s so these national players spend days per week / month with the developing squad as mentors / coaches so that the under 25 group can play, train, watch , observe, learn, umpire, be inspired, and be part of a succession plan

The coach used training camps for development of Strategy. Players can get to know their opponents, do a SWOT analysis, study film and others experiences, pre plan with game plans, mentally plan for a reaction to anticipated play from actions 1.2.3 etc have team mates role play

Part of the simulation I introduced was preparing the player to learn about coming from behind in an event example simulate by one player having 2 bowls against 4 bowls; or 3 bowls against 4 bowls; or a singles match (example was seen at Yallourn 9-21 winning 25-24)

The simulations were meant to develop confidence in fighting the 'uphill' battle so as to become accustomed to battle to the bell
e.g. Lina v. Haslah 4 ends to play and score 8-11
introduce deliberate bad calls so as to avoid a Glasson disqualification, a HK footfault, an unofficial minimum length simulated in practice

Another aspect of the simulation was climactic- practice in same time zone, temperature, rest well for tournament as to expect in an overseas event.

Interested to read on the Bowls Australia website in February 2006 they are simulating the sudden death aspect of the sets play format. A must if preparing properly for the Games.

The Badminton lesson is

- Never stop the flow of a game when winning
- Never change winning condition, length or hand in bowls
- Never change a shot that wins

Visualisation

Visualisation is amplified all over sport in recent years as we keep watching elite sport on our television sets.

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Orlick is one of numerous authors who write of the benefits of visualisation as a tool to enhance your performance by adding it to your list of mental skills.

I keep looking at our sport of bowls to see how I can adopt so many of these tools.

Visualisation to me is applied in these ways as an example
twice the shot – you deliver twice the number of bowls if you visualise your delivery and then execute your delivery;
deliveries of the opposition – you see more bowls and flight paths if you observe the opposition deliveries, and, if you guess the outcome of their bowl you add another skill of judging distance;
seeing is believing – watching your bowl until it completes its path enables you to believe that the bowl delivered undertook a path directly in accord with the execution;
body language – a picture is worth a 1000 words and your eyes interpret the language emitted from others on the rink;
sensory reaction and perception – using your eyesight is that application of common sense (eyes) which ensures you have all your skill responding to the cause;
memory retention – watching the precise path of an excellent path can allow the memory to tune into the eyes and call for that ‘file’ to be used again from the ‘computer ‘ brain.

Summary

I had hoped in my role as Australia’s High Performance manager to shift the skill training toward this vital area of mental skill, however others in the sport are still shuffling toward that mindset. The current management is forcing it through like a totalitarian regime, which will not work as well as having players and coaches embrace the benefits.

It can be done if the coaches in the sport take up their responsibility with renewed vigour so that players will

- Not groan and lament competing on sub standard surface conditions
- Realise in international events only the home side has advantage and if that is 23 countries then approximately 322 players or 96% are visitors with UK as 4% only home ground advantage in 2002
- Get real, the best prepared WIN
- excuses hold no sway with me, so when I came back here to Australia, I remind them that in Malaysia there are 1200 bowlers playing for a maximum of 10 yrs.
- Outcome = investment, commitment, performance