Seeing is Believing: Visualization

Visualization is a strategy that players often think about when they think of sport psychology. And, it’s true it is a powerful tool – if you believe in and commit to it.

The images you have in your head affect your thinking and confidence, and eventually your performance. Imagine if you spent 5 minutes per day visualizing your knee buckling as you trip and fall as you attempted to stop and go the other direction for a ball. What would that do to your confidence? What would happen when that situation occurred in practice or a match? Your mind would probably bring up the image. That wouldn’t be good.

Now imagine if you spent 5 minutes per day visualizing positive things like acing a test or serving an ace flat-t on break point. What would that do for your confidence?

Visualization is a powerful tool that can take your mental game to the next level. And, if you don’t use it you may be exposing your confidence to negative images and doubts. Visualization is basically playing in your mind what you want to happen or what has already happened. It’s thinking in images and controlling those images so you see what you want. Then, when you get in that situation on the court you will feel like “I’ve been here already and I’m good to go”.

Uses of Visualization

Visualization is more than lying on the ground and visualizing yourself at the beach (although this can be a very good use of imagery when stressed). For example, when visualizing passing shots you may want to visualize open lanes instead seeing the net person as covering the whole net.

When and how do you think you could use visualization?
Here are some ways to use visualization:

1. rehearsing tennis skills,
2. rehearsing situations and how you want to play them such as being attacked to your backhand, first point of your service game, when returning on break point...,
3. pre-play the environment you will play in and the distractions you will face,
4. rehearsing the discipline and emotional control to avoid losing your focus and temper,
5. rehearsing routines that you have developed to overcome mistakes, stay focused, think positive, etc. (Smith, 1999)

Two Aspects of Visualization

There are two aspects of visualization you want to work on: control and clarity. You want to create life-like images that simulate the match environment. This will boost your confidence more than fake or meaningless visualization. Control means seeing what you want to see, and at the speed you want it to occur. Clarity means seeing clear images; it is not cloudy but simulates the environment in color, with the noises and feelings that accompany the environment.

A Movie or in the First Person?

Something else to think about is from what perspective you want to visualize. Research tells us that the first person perspective is best (from your own eyes), but seeing it like a movie or on television doesn't hurt either (from a spectator’s view). At first choose what you are comfortable with and what works. Over time you probably want to practice the first person perspective so it matches your experiences during a match (remember, the more your visualization is life-like the more it boosts your confidence and prepares you for competition).

Visualization Practice

Common mistakes in practicing visualization include doing it while watching TV or doing something else, and not doing it often enough. Here are three recommendations:

1. When you are going to practice visualization and you are still learning, do it in your room when it’s quiet. Remove all distractions allow your mind to focus. It might be difficult enough as it is to visualize so don’t increase the difficulty. As you master visualization
then you do it in distracting environments to test your visualization ability.
2. Relaxation: You must be relaxed to use visualization. Quieting the mind of distracting thoughts and images is essential. Use deep breathing to calm the mind and body and prepare for visualization.
3. Practice every day for 5-10 minutes when first learning. Make a daily routine in the morning when you get up or before you go to bed.

Scripts for Practicing Control and Clarity

Listed next are two visualization scripts. Practice as a way to improve your visualization control and clarity. When you become good at these change them and add stuff from your experience (such as imagining yourself back at your home court when you were age 12 and playing a final match).

Clarity Script

Imagine walking out to the court. Notice the warn feeling from the sun and a light cool breeze. Take a deep breath and smell the flowers by the court. As you enter the court and walk to the bench notice how you feel; excited, energized, confident, ready, in control, skilled. Feel yourself warming up on the court. Feeling smooth, strong, quick, powerful. Full of energy. Now look around the court. Look at the fences, the net, the lines, take it all in. In your mind’s eye create an image of the court. Imagine it as your place to go to be focused and enjoy tennis. This is your zone between the lines.

Become aware of your opponent stretching. And, now begin the warm up with your opponent. Feel your muscles working effortlessly and full of energy. See the ball hitting the strings and exploding off your racket. Feel the full control of every ball being struck with focus and intensity. Feel your muscles work and your body begin to warm-up. Hear your shoes squeaking as you move your feet. Finally, focus on the feelings you have as you begin to warm-up.

Control Script

Imagine yourself holding a tennis ball. Examine it very closely: the color, the edges, logo, texture, and any other details you can imagine. Were you able to conjure a detailed image of a ball from your mind? Now see the ball dropping to the court and bouncing back up in to your hand. Next imagine that you are serving and going through your final ritual of bouncing the ball. Feel the ball in one hand and the racket in the other. Feel the weight of the ball in your hand as you raise your
toss and racket hand together, seeing the ball rise above you. Feel your body being to coil and uncoil as it explodes up in to the ball. You make great contact with the ball and it explodes off your racket as you snap the wrist as you follow through. Feel your body stepping in to the court. Imagine the ball landing on the t and play the point out in your mind.

What Should I Visualize?

The answer to this question really depends on what you want from it. How do you want to feel when you are finished with your visualization?

These “power” words and phrases such be littered throughout your visualization either by saying them (“I feel confident, loose, quick”), seeing it (visualize moving with power, quickness), and feeling it (move the body parts to simulate the running motion).

Also remember that your visualization should get you where you want to be pre-match and refocused in-match. Thinking of that, list the images, thoughts, and feelings you would like to have in your visualization.

When you practice take this with you and read it beforehand. It will help you control your images and also keep it relevant (so you aren’t daydreaming of eating hamburgers!).

What Should I do when My Visualization isn’t Working?

This is a common question. The answer should not be to give up or believe it doesn’t work. Instead, thinking about where your visualization is breaking down? Are you seeing what you want to see (control)? Seeing it full speed and clearly (clarity)? Is your mind cluttered with other things? The answers to these questions should tell which of the strategies to use:
1. **Clear your head by using deep, controlled breathing** until you are focused on counting your breaths, one word, or one image. Then, begin visualization.

2. **Try not to force your visualization.** When distractions come in let them float away versus getting frustrated. The mind by its nature jumps around; do your best to keep it focused but know that you will get distracted at times.

3. When your visualization is not going well and you are seeing negative things then **stop and restart**. Do this by visualizing a “black screen”, erasing the negative image from a marker board, or symbolically taking the remote control and changing the channel to a positive image.

4. Make sure you have **eliminated many of the daily distractions** from your visualization environment. Play some calming music in the background if you need some consistent noise to focus.

5. **Try something easier to visualize** like your home court, the tennis ball, hitting a serve, etc. Move from static and simple to moving and complex.

If you try these strategies and your still struggle contact Dr. Lauer for help.

**Six Ways to Make Visualization Impact Your Game**

Practicing visualization is important, right, but in the end if it doesn’t help you improve your on-court performance then why do it? Here are six ways you can integrate visualization in to your preparation and performances.

1. **Prior to matches:** Visualization should be completely positive and focus on successfully completing the tasks needed to perform well. Imagine meeting your goals for the match and feeling the way you want to feel – full of energy, intensity, and yet with a calm and confident feeling.

2. **Prior to practice:** Focus imagery on meeting the goals for improvement. Think about what you need to do to get the most out of practice. Imagine success on new skills, or old ones that you’re having difficulty executing.

3. **During matches:** Between points and during changeovers review what happened on the previous point/game. Use visualization to learn from the situation immediately. During matches visualization should be quick (i.e., maybe 5-10 seconds) and provide an emotional lift and confident feeling. Finish by seeing yourself being successful (i.e., hitting out on the ball, playing the kind of point you want to play) during the next point.
4. **During practice:** Visualize during practice to prepare to learn new skills or pick up the intensity. For new skills, use slow-motion visualization to see and feel the skill before attempting it. Following execution of the new skill, review your performance by rewinding the video in your head and looking for technical errors. To energize or pick up the intensity in practice, see fast moving images of power and intensity.

5. **Post-match:** Following matches take some time to review your performance. Look for both what you did right and wrong during the match. Post-match should not be a time to beat yourself up, but a time to learn from the match and prepare for the next practice.

6. **Post-practice:** Same as above. Review practice and the quality of your training. Determine what skills you will focus on for future improvement.

**What’s My Plan for Using Visualization?**

Using visualization is useless unless your practice it regularly and implement it wisely into preparation and performances. List below how you will train visualization and use it to play more confident, ready tennis.

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**Quick Visualization Steps**

Goal: See what you want to prepare for matches and boost your confidence.

Steps:
- Think first before starting about what you want to visualize.
- Then, start with deep breathing to clear your head (usually 3-5 minutes).
- Once your head is clear, visualize the images you planned.
- Focus on the feelings of confidence, calmness, composure and readiness you gain from the visualization.
- If you see negative or irrelevant images, try the following:
  - Go to a black screen and then refocus on your image.
  - Take the remote and change the channel in your head to the positive image.
  - Erase it on the marker board, and then replace it.