

The Mental Game - Maintaining Focus Part 2

In an earlier article on maintaining focus (May 2014), I discussed some tactics that could be undertaken to cope with distractions that occur during bridge events. These distractions could be external such as noisy players, director calls, noisy room, etc; or internal to you such as when you have made an error and your mind cannot let that go. In a later article on Visualisation (January 2015), I described how mental rehearsal assists athletes in performing their routines. When I was shooting, I mentally rehearsed every shot I made in practice and competition before firing the shot. The process became automatic, and only took a few seconds each time. My mental program started after I loaded the rifle. I would run through in my mind the perfect shot sequence that I wanted to perform, then execute it (no pun intended!). At the end of the mental program I would think the word "Ten" and picture the sight centred on the target. This cue word was the instruction to my mind to focus. After running my mental program and saying the cue word, I was at what is called the *point of initiation*, after which my mind was now focussed on firing the shot and not on anything else. Athletes in all types of sport use this type of process before executing their performance.

How might this type of mental program apply at the bridge table? How do we ensure we maintain focus during a hand? Or if we lose it, how do we regain focus? I mentioned earlier the use of a cue word in my mental program for shooting. This cue word was a signal to my mind to focus and pay attention to the task at hand. I believe the same tactic could apply in bridge. Here is how I think it could work.

There are two parts to every hand.

- Part one is the bidding.
- Part two is the play either as declarer or defender.

Between Part one and Part two there is a small break in concentration while you write the contract down on your scoresheet/enter it in the electronic scorer.

Before commencing Part one, you could use a cue word to get your mind on the job at the *point of initiation*. I suggest in bridge this is the point just before you take the cards out of the traveller.

The cue word could be anything that works for you, but it should be an action word. Something like Attention, Focus, Count or some other word to get your mind to wake up to the fact you are about to initiate the bidding sequence. The "word" is a signal to your mind to pay attention and stop worrying about distractions around the room, the last hand, etc. Say it every time you are about to pick up your cards to play a hand and take a deep breath. It also helps if there is a routine to this part of the hand. For example: Check I am picking up my seat's cards, Count Cards, Check who's Dealer, Check Vulnerability, Sort Cards; Count points; etc. (note this is not an exhaustive list, but it is a basic routine to get your mind on track). Just like an athlete rehearses the jump they are about to make, and I rehearsed the shot I was about to fire, the routine and focussing process will have the most impact if you run it mentally through your mind before saying the cue word and picking up the cards.

When the auction is finished, there is a short break in concentration while some housekeeping happens like entering the contract, notes on record sheets and so on. Before commencing Part 2,

the play of the hand, you want to refocus. Use the same word to help get your mind back on track for this part of the game. I suggest avoiding a word like "lead" - it might make you lead out of turn!

It is a well known fact that the mind has a limited attention span before it needs a "mental break". Given matches are usually 1 - 2 hours duration, planning mental breaks and using cue words to refocus your attention can ensure you maintain an appropriate level of focus during your whole competition and avoid those costly lapses in concentration that might occur without a mental management plan.