

The Mental Game - Mental Rehearsal (Visualisation)

Athletes, business people, fighter pilots, doctors and people in all types of professions use mental rehearsal and visualisation to help them with their performances in a variety of ways. For example a professional basketball player may mentally picture themselves shooting the ball through the basket from the free throw line before making the throw in a match. They will think about how the shot feels based on a shot they have executed previously in practice or a match. Similarly a guest speaker who gets nervous when presenting may use mental rehearsal to picture themselves in the auditorium giving their speech. Athletes in Olympic and other events obtain photos of the competition arena prior to their event so that they can familiarise themselves with the field of play prior to their match. Being mentally comfortable helps the athlete relax prior to the event and contributes to a better performance. There are many ways in which mental rehearsal and visualisation can be used to assist with improving performance.

Studies have shown that the mind cannot tell the difference between a real performance and an imagined performance. It has also been shown that people will improve a skill more quickly using a combination of rehearsal and practice than simply using practice alone. Certainly in many sports the athlete uses a rehearsal of the shot sequence in their mind before executing the play as a routine process. For example a high jumper will prepare for their jump by standing at the start of their run up, and mentally rehearsing the run up & leap over the jump in their mind before they execute it. In shooting I used mental rehearsal all the time to practice my shot sequence, and visualise shooting a perfect match. In a match I had a set routine I used before every shot.

How could mental rehearsal help a bridge player?

In my view, there are several areas where mental rehearsal could be useful:

1. **Environment:** Every player experiences aspects of bridge for the first time. It might be your first club competition, congress, major tournament, state trial, your first time behind screens or first time on vu-graph, or the first time you have a kibbitzer. Some players will be unaffected by the experience whilst others might perform below their best due to the unfamiliar environment. Using visualisation prior to the event can help you be more comfortable in the environment with which you are faced.
2. **Specific bridge skills:** For example players often have difficulty remembering a convention they have agreed to play. Using visualisation to rehearse the bidding sequence will assist with ensuring the convention will be remembered in the match environment.
3. Practice the play of **specific card combinations**.
4. **Play Skills:** Picturing the layout of the hands and then the mechanics of the skill you are trying to consolidate e.g. throw-in; finesse, counting the hand, etc.
5. **Common occurrences:** Rehearsal can also be useful to deal with certain environmental occurrences that inhibit performance. Different things affect different people, but if the competitor is aware of their personal negative influences (e.g. chatty opponents, noisy room, director calls, etc.), then mental rehearsal can help prepare a stronger structured response to it.

You can use visualisation to help with any aspect of your game that you struggle with and want to improve.

How to rehearse effectively.

The first step is to achieve a state of relaxation in which to do the rehearsal (see ABF Journal Nov 2014 article on Relaxation). Next rehearse the aspect of your performance you want to work on. It may be picturing yourself playing on vu-graph. It might be the start of the match where you see yourself and your partner at the table bidding and playing the first few hands. It might be picturing a hand and bidding a particular convention. Whichever aspect you choose to rehearse, try to make the rehearsal as real as possible. For example if you decide to rehearse playing the first few hands, make the rehearsal as real as possible.

- Picture yourself at the table with your partner & opponents
- Picture yourself picking your hand up and counting the cards & sorting them;
- Imagine the hand you have been dealt, count your points;
- Imagine your partner opening the bidding;
- Imagine your response;
- Imagine you are declarer in the final contract;
- Imagine partner's hand coming down and the cards being exactly what you expected;
- Imagine playing the hand;
- Imagine making your contract and the feeling of satisfaction that you have got off to a good start in the tournament
- Repeat for the next hand

Rehearse one skill or aspect per rehearsal session. You can repeat a skill in several rehearsal sessions until you feel comfortable that you have mastered it. Thousands of athletes have found that spending 20 minutes a day on relaxation and mental rehearsal is worth the effort. Mental rehearsal cannot replace practical training, however I believe that used in conjunction, it can enhance your ability as a player.

Once again my thanks to Sartaj Hans and David Morgan for their thoughtful insights on this article.