

# Imagery

By Michelle Cleere, Sports Psychology Consultant

*Michelle has a sports psychology Q and A on the Runner's Web. Submit your questions to Michelle at: [SportsMindedMC@aol.com](mailto:SportsMindedMC@aol.com) and we will post her answers on the Runner's Web.*

By Michelle Cleere, Sport & Exercise Psychology Consultant

## Theories:

Psychoneuromuscular theory: when an athlete practices using imagery the athlete imagines movements without performing them, although the brain interprets this as if the athlete were performing them, which provides similar impulses in the brain and in the muscles. Small impulses fire from your brain to your muscles with the exactness that you are imagining.

Cognitive theory: says that the "blueprint" (map) in your mind is changed through imagery. For example, if you've run for years with your arms swinging across your body you will automatically do that out of habit every time you run. However, if you learn that better arm swing positioning is probably straight back and forth you can help change your mind's blueprint through imagery.

## Where to begin:

1) Recreate a past personal experience. Think back to a time when you had a positive, in the zone experience in your sport. Now recreate that experience by writing down as much as you can remember.

2) Create a positive experience you have not had. If you can't remember having your own past positive experience the next best thing is to use something/someone else. Generally we all know someone in our sport who we think of as a role model and if not a role model, we know of someone who is an icon in the sport. Think about what makes that person a role model or an icon. If you have a DVD or can find one of this person participating in the sport watch it and think about what makes this person a role model or an icon. Write all of those elements down on a piece of paper.

The next step is to write a story either about your own past, positive experience or the person you see as a role model or icon. As you go through try to include as much about the situation or person as you can. Include all of the senses to make your imagine as vivid as possible.

## When to use imagery:

- 1) Use snippets during your day whenever you have a moment, particularly in times when you are thinking about your sport.
- 2) Incorporate imagery into your dreams.
- 3) Use imagery as part of a pre-practice/pre-performance routine.

## Imagery takes practice:

Every thing we do in life takes development, support, and refinement. None of what we do is (really) automatic. Imagery takes practice. You need to develop your piece of imagery. You need to support it by giving it the time it deserves through patience and practice. This is probably one of the most difficult aspects of imagery because you will have to 'learn' to stay focused enough to use it. You also probably will need to work on refining it; adding more vividness.

## Why use imagery:

Imagery can be used in many ways because it's so similar to actually performing the experience. You can use it to learn something new, error correction/improvement, relax, focus, confidence, injury recovery, etc. Research clearly concludes that combined with physical practice imagery can produce superior skill learning.

*Michelle is owner of Sports Minded, a Sports Psychology Consulting practice. She works with individuals and groups on performance enhancement. Michelle is an NASM-certified personal trainer and a USA Triathlon-certified triathlon coach. E-mail questions and comments to her at [SportsMindedMC@aol.com](mailto:SportsMindedMC@aol.com) or check out her web site at [MentalStrength.com](http://MentalStrength.com).*