

Refereeing Strategy: Attention and Concentration

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With the current article, we seek to analyse one of the most important – and at the same time paradoxically, most neglected – aspects of referee training: **Concentration**. But first, let us begin by defining the concepts as they appear in the title:

Attention can be defined as:

The (mental) cognitive capacity of selection of the desired information, required in a specific point in time.

The most salient **characteristics** of attention are:

- The capacity of attention of a person is limited (failure to take advantage of the resources)
- A person tends to focus his/her attention on those parts of an activity that have been well-learned (paralysis by analysis)
- Fatigue and anxiety are internally related to the deterioration of attention.

We can make the following differentiations between the **types of attention**:

- **Extensive external:** used for the rapid evaluation of a situation (counterattacks).
- **Narrow external:** attention focused on a concrete stimulus of the surroundings (pivots).
- **Extensive internal:** the focus is on one's experiences; very useful in decision making and anticipation (7 m. throw).
- **Narrow internal:** appropriate for the mental review of a situation of control

With regards to attention, the following **recommendations** can be made:

- Depending on the situation, attention demands also vary. Therefore, it is important to switch the attention type in accord with the environment.
- The individuals have dominant or preferred types of attention due to acquired, genetic or biochemical factors.
- The activation level influences the focus of attention: if our activation level is low, our attention will be focused on the most dominant stimuli.
- If the activation level is too high and the noise is important, the referee tends to lose control of his attention.
- Low activation levels (for wingers) appear to be the dominant style.
- The focus of attention also influences the activation level (keeping an eye on the public or on the coach can result in loss of control)

Concentration could be defined as:

The capacity to maintain the attention on a stimulus selected
in a specific point in time

Some **techniques** for the improvement of concentration could be:

- Search for related signals (letters, numbers)
- Relaxation / breathing
- Maintainance of focus:
 - Train imagination/visualization; visualization of the sport world.
 - Take an object, perceive the sensations, drop it and fix the attention on it for a while.
- Training of attention shift:
 - Pay attention to external sounds
 - Pay attention to corporal sensations
 - Pay attention to thoughts and feelings
 - Extend and narrow the external focus of attention (pay attention to the whole room and narrow down to one object)

Distraction elements:

Maintaining concentration for longer periods of time – especially without having trained it before – can result not only in physical, but also mental fatigue and can decrease performance. Mental fatigue breaks the mechanisms of attention and disables the selection of the proper stimuli, reducing attention levels as the feeling of fatigue becomes evident, and blocks physiological and mental functions. Subsequently, it is impossible to remain concentrated due to the interference of elements of distraction, such as pain, thoughts, and fatigue. The distractions are in the senses or the mind of the perceiver.

Types of distraction elements:

Not all elements of distraction are equal and it is important to recognize that a general set of instructions that can apply to all situations does not exist.

There are three main types of distraction elements:

External elements (demonstrated by the internal elements).

They can be the public, the referees, the rivals, etc.; and some or all of these causes can be due to:

- **Boredom:** The athlete is not motivated. The level of stimuli of the training and the sport objectives to reach are not adapted to the athlete's possibilities.
- **Anger:** The athlete becomes disconnected due to anger or frustration.
- **Precipitation:** The athlete deals with too many things too soon; it breaks the suitable rate of the sport execution.

Internal elements: They have their origins within the athlete; in his thoughts, namely:

- ***Dissociative thinking:*** The athlete's thoughts and feelings are disconnected from the sports activity he is involved in, in the given moment.
- ***Excessively analytical thinking:*** It is the so-called "Paralysis by analysis", also frequently experienced by coaches.
- ***Thoughts of weakness:*** Thoughts that denote lack of self-confidence, that the goal cannot be obtained.

Elements related to the inability to change the shape.

This situation usually results in a blockage: physical and mental rigidity, where the athlete is trapped in his mind and his corporal reactions.

Example of a different training for the referees

After arriving at the venue, where we would be officiating, and having made all the necessary preparations with the scorekeeper and the timekeeper, we got dressed and moved on to the playing court for our warm up.

While jogging, we could first observe our surroundings: the stands, the position of the benches, the lights, etc (extensive external attention).

We then entered the specific part of our warm-up: stretching, extensions, rotations, warm up of ligaments, joints and all the parts of the body that we were going to use. At this stage, we could feel our bodies: the moves, some painful parts, and at the same time the breathing /activation (long inhalations and long and paused exhalations recommended), (extensive internal attention).

This was then followed by the main phase of the warm-up, with short and explosive sprints, changes of direction, run-and-bend, and all those exercises that imitate in-game situations. We changed our breathing pattern to inhaling faster and exhale in the same way (narrow internal attention; we must notice that our heart and our lungs are prepared for the match and our minds calmed but activated).

At the last stage of preparation, we returned to easy jogging and cooling down. At the same time, we observed the players, one by one, and checked their uniforms and whether they have bandages, rings, earrings or bracelets.

This is one of the important moments, as we usually spoil the work made during the warm up. We must focus our attention on relevant external stimuli: nets, players and coaches, while we simultaneously run internal checks for our entire organism: pulse, temperature, etc. (extensive internal attention and narrow external attention).

It is important to be able to put into play all the types of attention.

To sum it up, while already in the game, we can emphasize on different questions with relation to attention and concentration:

Situations that creates tension:

- Championship or games of great importance.
- Fear of failure.
- A specific situation in the game.

Physical changes:

- Increase of muscular tension.
- Increase of cardiac rate.
- Alteration of breathing.

Shifts of attention:

- Distracting thoughts.
- Reduced internal style.
- Confusing information.

Blockage:

- Increase of mistakes.
- Haste.
- Fatigue and muscular tension.
- Incapacity to attend to relevant stimuli.