

STEP 4 – UNDERSTANDING IMAGERY



Imagery: Our most powerful yet under-used tool. Most athletes frequently think or daydream about their sport. For many it stops there. In a passive way we think about a particular game or play, dream about winning a championship, or get down on ourselves for a mistake we made. Top performers use their minds in a positive way. We are what we think we are. Those things that we think about most are those things that are most likely to happen. Our mind is a powerful tool that influences what we do. Imagery is a technique that uses the power of your mind to assist you in performing at a higher level.

The terms imagery, visualization, and mental practice all refer to using your imagination to help you reach your goals. In hockey, this generally involves vividly creating or recreating an on-ice performance in your mind. It can help you learn a new skill, build your confidence, create a contingency plan, change your mood, change your energy level, reduce your anxiety, and give you extra practice!

The world's best athletes have highly developed imagery skills and use these skills on a regular basis. Imagery is a mental training technique that involves using all your senses including thoughts, feelings, emotions, and other sensations such as sight, sound, feel/adrenaline to create or recreate an experience in your own mind.

Here are some ways that hockey players use imagery:

- To see success/focus on what you want to do on the ice
- To motivate
- To manage your energy level
- To learn and over-learn skills
- To calm down or to energize
- To refocus
- To prepare for a practice
- To prepare for a game
- To overlearn systems
- Anticipate adversity and rehearse pushing through it
- To practice overcoming internal distractions, frustration, etc.
- To learn new skills more quickly

How does imagery work?

First, research has demonstrated that imagery strengthens the neural pathways - when you imagine performing a particular sport skill, your muscles fire in the same sequence as if you were actually performing the skill. Second, imagery functions as a coding system in the brain to help hockey players form a plan or “mental blueprint” that allows us to react automatically.

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The key is to program your mind, muscles, and emotions for success, and to make your imagery as vivid, realistic, and detailed as possible. When you vividly imagine yourself getting ready for competition, your central nervous system becomes programmed for success. It's as if the activity you visualized has already happened!

How to apply imagery

- Before a workout – see yourself getting stronger, see yourself completing the exercise or drill, connect the exercise to executing on the ice during the season.
- When away from training to help reach goals – mentally practice the skills that you are deliberately improving via your goals
- Before practice – run through what you want to accomplish, in your mind's eye see yourself at practice, working hard, making the most of your time. Set one or two specific performance goals for yourself. Vividly imagine yourself accomplishing these goals.
- Before games – make imagery part of your pre-game routine that gets you ready to do your best. Recall some of your best performances. Visualize the actions from “when I am at my best on the ice...”
- Use imagery to rehearse tough situations where you might be distracted – plan for adversity! Vividly picture yourself handling it well and getting on with your performance.
- Before periods/shifts – Players can use a slight pause (when on the bench, between periods) to center and focus on their next shift. You can use imagery to rehearse breakouts, forechecks, shots on net, checks, passes, etc.
 - o Visualize common scenarios - areas of your game that you are working to improve (goals); this is part of deliberate practice
 - o Visualize in zones – DZ, NZ, OZ
 - o Flow from zone to zone (scramble in DZ to breakout through NZ, entry to OZ – shot, battle, back-check). Visualize shifts.
 - o Visualize face-offs, breakouts, controlled breakouts, zone entries, fore-checks, traps, back-checking, getting in shooting lane, etc.
 - o Visualize Offensive and Defensive 1 v 1, 2 v 1, 3 v 1
 - o Visualize less frequent but important aspects of a game– end of game 6 v 4 offense, end of game 6 v 4 defense, 5 v 3, etc.
 - o Visualize specific skills you are working on (gaps, cutbacks, shooting with feet moving, net front battles).
 - o Visualize PP and PK situations
 - o Visualize managing your emotions and not reacting to cheap shots or bad calls.