

Learning Mental Control

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Setting the stage

Ever notice how relaxed and loose Efren Reyes seems to be when he plays? That is one of the characteristics of his exceptional level of play. He usually has a laugh or a smile when he misses a silly shot. This is a key concept that is often missed. In any sport one's body must be relaxed and ready to get it all together as needed. In a sense you are ignoring all irrelevant information from your body by having it completely relaxed. You can see this loose body in basketball players at the free throw line when the player seems to shake themselves loose before attempting the shot. This is the precursor to enhanced concentration: Let it all go so I can place all of my attention at one point.

Concentration can be described as narrowing ones attention by excluding irrelevant information. It can begin by attempting to visualize the line of travel for the object ball from about nine inches behind the OB to the pocket. This line is then visually traced to the contact point and you try to visualize the smallest possible contact point throughout the time the player is bending over. This will help exclude other information and one's concentration increases with attention to physical detail that is real and imagined. Concentration is discussed further below.

Verbalization is disruptive to this process. Any attempt to use internal dialog will interfere with the process. This is why we make our calculations for hit and cue ball roll before we bend over; one of the things that will help to improve your concentration is to get the internal dialog out of the way. If you think about it you cannot hum a song you know well and verbalize at the same time. Internal humming and or the use of some thing like "Omm" will help to increase your concentration.

People who practice Yoga know that if you hum the word "Omm" allowing yourself to go up and down the scale, increasing and decreasing the resonance you will find a natural, pleasing sound that suits your body and your temperament. Find this sound and use it internally to stop the dialog and to help increase your concentration.

One way to initialize the level of concentration is to use a three phase process: Stand and calculate. When your calculations are done, shake yourself loose (like a basketball player). Step into the shot as a signal to your mind to start your personal sound and to stop thinking. As you bend to the shot, exclude all outside information and simply observe your mind and body concentrate on the shot.

Of course you need a good pre-shot routine that you enter automatically. Focus often shifts to stroke mechanics for some people and this is disruptive. To the extent that one can learn to trust their mechanics and never lose sight of the place the cue ball is targeted

focus increases and the body stays relaxed. It is for this reason that planning the cue ball's resulting position is done before one bends over. Once you bend over it is all about narrowing one's attention to exact lines of travel.

Basketball players, excellent golfers and pool players are not thinking about mechanics as they make a shot. They are simply looking at or concentrating on the ball. One of the things that help one's concentration is knowing there is no aftermath from the resulting shot. Exceptional players simply walk away, shake it off, perhaps laugh and move to the next condition. When the unconscious knows there will be no self criticism following the shot it can concentrate all the more on the shot. Some people might be angry they missed but they are not angry with their self. Jimmy Connors comes to mind here as do some of the well known pool players. Anticipation of self recriminations can also affect one's play.

Given the foregoing you can see that improving one's ability to concentrate is fairly straight forward. Depending upon where you work and what your life is about, you can create exercises that will help you to rapidly shift into a high state of concentration.

One of the keys to going into and out of a relaxed state of high concentration is to stay loose and relaxed between shots. If you are worried about your girlfriend flirting with that guy at the bar, deal with it, and get back to the important things in life.

How to increase your ability to concentrate

There are two phases to playing pool well. This is probably true for most individual sports. In the first phase the player practices mechanics or how to address the ball. This is all about what you tell yourself to do such as foot placement, alignment, stroke, etc. These are consciously or intentionally practiced. We use our conscious logical thought to structure the way to approach a pool shot. This information is placed in our subconscious which uses the information for execution. The use of conscious and subconscious processes will be discussed in the next section where we get it all together for excellent play. First you need to learn to intensely concentrate.

To learn highly focused concentration for playing is a topic of its own. In this phase begin while standing one step behind the final position. Direct your attention to the object ball. Mentally draw a line from the pocket to about nine inches behind the center of the object ball. Retrace the line to the contact point on the object ball. Re-tracing the line from behind the object ball towards the pocket helps you to find the contact point in the center of the object ball. This contact spot should be about $1/16^{\text{th}}$ of an inch in diameter. There are no words in your head while this is going on. You are trying to "see" the lines and the contact point. Hold this contact point spot and the line to the pocket in your mind for three to five seconds or until it is firmly fixed. Try to see the object ball roll down this line or roll in a channel similar to a set of railroad tracks.

With the contact point firmly fixed direction your attention to the cue ball and your cue stick. First visualize a line through the center of the cue ball to the contact point. This will

take a few seconds. Here too begin from behind the cue ball. Place your cue stick on the line through the cue ball contact point to the contact point on the object ball. At this point you determine the need for English and what is needed to have the cue ball arrive at the correct place for position. When your calculations are complete you are ready for highly focused concentration.

Step into the shot placing your foot as you have decided in your pre-shot routine. Stepping into the shot is your trigger that will turn the shot making over to your subconscious processes. All thoughts leave your mind and you do nothing but see the lines of travel for the cue ball as you bend over. When you are bent over you have a different perspective on the cue ball and the object ball but your mind will compensate as needed. All that you are doing is staring at the contact points and letting your subconscious shoot the shot. Everything happens naturally as previously practiced. At this point focus on placing the back hand on the shot line through the cue ball to the object ball contact point. When you are down on the shot all of your attention is on the line to the contact point, the stick's alignment, the effect of English, power and most importantly attempting to visualize the cue ball line of travel the hit and the object ball line of travel and the subsequent movement of the cue ball after contact. In the end you are staring at the contact point and the cue ball line of travel for a few seconds. All of this requires a great amount of highly focused attention to detail for where it feels like you should strike the cue ball with the stick. When the stroke has been completed nothing in your body moves until you see the cue ball strike the object ball.

When practicing this type of highly focused attention to detail use no words. The whole process is nonverbal and you are something like an observer of your own behavior. After the shot you may notice that you like or did not like the way you applied the mechanics and you may make a mental note of what needs to be worked on later.

There are ideas about why one should concentrate but there are few actual suggestions for how to improve one's concentration because concentration itself is a nonverbal process. In this somewhat lengthy discussion I have attempted to break down what it is that one actually does when they concentrate on a pool shot. The primary point is the idea that it is a semi-physical act that allows for no verbal dialog in the execution of a pool shot. When using this technique you will find that your body warms up and that you are tired by the end of a match. You will also find that after learning to concentrate in this way you are nearly unaware of anything else going on around you in a bar or the pool room.

This type of heightened concentration must be practiced until it becomes natural and is initiated anytime you walk to the table to take a shot and take one step back. There is a residual affect in that you will be less aware of others between shots. It is as though you do not want to pay attention to others very much and prefer to have your head in or near the game. Sometimes when you have decided on a three ball run you do not come out of this state of subconscious control and you may need another trigger to re-initiate the analytical processes as discussed below.

The ability to fully attend to and concentrate on the shot is something that is a separate part of your practice routine. It is an ability that requires practice and reinforcement during the practice sessions. It is not one of the topics that is a great deal of "fun" and that is perhaps why it is not included in many practice routines. Once learned it tends to become a part of one's approach but it too requires continued practice over time. The part of the player that is the observer notes when it needs refinement.

Here is a summary of the automated concentration procedure.

1. From one step behind the shot, concentrate on the OB line of travel. Fix the line and contact point in mind (takes a few seconds).
2. Decide where the cue ball will land for position.
3. See the line from cue ball to object ball.
4. Verify that the cue ball can get to the position and the needed English.
5. Step into the shot. Place the cue stick on the shot line with the back hand. All verbalization stops.
6. Stroke or aim through the center of the cue ball to verify the line of travel to the contact point.
7. Add English as needed.
8. Check stroke.
9. Fire and see the hit on the object ball

Note that mechanics, stroke, and verbalizations are ignored. It is now all about concentration.

One way to practice wordless concentration that is quite effective is to sit (or lay down) in a quiet dark room. Close your eyes and look at the back of your eyelids. Try to imagine a candle flame about three feet in front of you. If you are quiet and patient the flame will flicker for a split second or so. Then it will go away and thoughts and other images will intrude. Rather than make the other thoughts go away just let them pass as you continue to patiently try and create that image of a candle flame. With a few weeks, yes weeks not days, of practice you will get to the point where you might be able to hold the image for about five seconds on the odd occasion. This form of meditation is a way of strengthening your ability to visualize and to concentrate with out words. You only need to practice it for about five minutes (a long time) each day or when you go to bed. After you have learned it, it needs to be refreshed every few months when you find your ability decreasing. When you have learned to visually concentrate in this way you will find it "easier" to concentrate on a pool shot.

The role of the subconscious

When we are playing at our best it is the subconscious part of our brain / mind that has control of the shot making. In this section I discuss the subconscious and its role in playing well. The need for one or more triggering mechanisms is also discussed.

The subconscious contains those things that you can readily and easily bring into your awareness. For instance, you probably are not thinking about your socks and how they feel but you can easily bring this feeling into your awareness from your subconscious. If there is a problem with your socks your subconscious will alert you that something needs attention. It is important to realize that the subconscious helps or assists the consciousness. In everyday life there are far too many things that need to be attended to and our consciousness would be overwhelmed if we had to be aware of and coordinate every little thing. The subconscious not only monitors the world around us, out of our usual awareness, it also coordinates many of our reflexive actions. The sock example shows that it is good that we are not usually aware of our socks because this allows more of our mind to attend to other more important details. However, it is also good that the subconscious is monitoring our socks and will alert us if there is some potential problem. The subconscious has a very real and necessary helper function that can be used in many ways.

The unconscious contains things that are more difficult to bring into awareness. For instance you may find yourself attracted to feisty women and you don't know why. You just know that you prefer women with a spirit. They are more sexually appealing for some reason. If we dug deeply it may turn out that your mother and your aunt are both feisty women though you would not admit it if someone brought it up because we have a difficult time associating Mom with sex. The unconscious contains characteristics, attitudes, and preferences that were often learned outside of our normal awareness. At times these things become associated in ways that were not intended by the person. The unconscious may help to explain why we like to play pool but that is not the issue. Here we are concerned with how the subconscious can be enhanced to help with pool playing.

Part of the subconscious interacts with motor reflexes in ways the consciousness cannot do. For instance most people cannot make their heart speed up. But with the appropriate training, usually biofeedback, you can gain control over this and many other physical processes that are usually under subconscious and motor reflex control.

When learning to play pool we use conscious processes and logical thought to plant learned subroutines into the subconscious so these routines can be called up without emotional overrides. The subconscious is much better at coordinating all of the muscles needed for the job at hand and we come to think of it as being on autopilot. Actually we are placing ourselves under subconscious control.

Emotions have strong effects on our behavior. They can and do interrupt our thought processes and our physical activity. To the extent that we can stay calm and turn over the

routine to the subconscious we can be a better player. We do not like sharking because the emotions they stimulate override the directions we have sent to the subconscious processes.

When you step into the shot and stop any internal dialog this is a physical trigger indicating that you are turning control of shot making over to the subconscious processes. The subconscious is a nonverbal process that needs to be initiated for it to have full control of the brain / mind. It is ever present but it is usually in a secondary, helping role relative to our conscious logical or analytical consciousness. When we are playing pool we want the subconscious to have full control of the shot making and thus need to bring it to the forefront of our brain / mind through the use of a trigger. The subconscious is much better at executing a shot than our consciousness. It functions best for shot making when we have given it all of the operating room available. Stepping into the shot is one way of signaling the brain / mind that consciousness is to relinquish control and that the subconscious is to step up and do its thing.

For some people picking up and putting down a piece of chalk is a dual trigger: Something like a light switch. Several professionals use this type of trigger so it does work for some people. However, a light switch trigger can become confusing and may not at times turn on/off as needed.

We have all see good players made some stupid shot and then say that they simply forgot to stop and think. At times some of these people may have been stuck in the subconscious mode after a shot and only came halfway back to the analytical or conscious control. The subconscious has a great deal of respect for the analytical engine and usually defers to consciousness thought if it knows that it is time to back off.

It is not always obvious to the subconscious when it should back off and so a second trigger is also a good idea. Much is discussed about turning the shot over to autopilot but little emphasis is given to getting back into conscious (analytical) control. We see these "brain farts" as anomalies but I suspect they may occur more often than some people would think. At times we have planned three or four shots ahead and think / allow ourselves to try and stay under subconscious control for the duration of the run. When position is not obtained and we do not come out of the subconscious state a mistake is likely.

For some people two separate triggers might be better. The subconscious and the unconscious parts of our minds are quite literal and usually need very clear instructions. For instance telling your subconscious that you want the 6 ball in the corner is not the same thing as saying you want the 6 ball in the corner pocket.

I think that one of the more difficult things to communicate to the subconscious is the idea that we want two things to be accomplished: Place the six in the corner pocket and leave the cue ball six inches off the first diamond. It is usually best to say 6 here cue ball here and look at the places that we want. These are clear instructions. By the way, it is

not good to say six in the pocket and cue ball six inches off the second diamond: Too many words and too much use of the same number.

Ever notice that you usually can make an excellent shot or get great position but it is difficult to get both. Part (not all) of the problem here is confusing communication. We have to emphasize that both things are important and this is a difficult thing to learn to balance. Being aware of the problem is part of the solution. The subconscious usually prioritizes behaviors and places more emphasis on one over the other unless it is all seen as one action. It is for this reason that it is good to practice pocketing and position until it is well learned that you are not satisfied until both goals are accomplished. One way to help the subconscious with this problem is to think in terms of the line (not the exact spot) where the cue ball should land.

Picking up the chalk and physically stopping in ones tracks is a good trigger for “stop and think.” Physically stopping in your tracks after picking up the chalk would be an excellent redundancy that reinforced the “think about it phase.” The intent is to clearly specify what the brain/ mind is to do.

In whatever way you do it, some trigger that gets you out of the subconscious mode is useful.

Coping with the unconscious when playing pool

The unconscious contains many things and has been written about extensively. None-the-less there are people who think that we do not have an unconscious or that it is a poorly defined term. You do have an unconscious and it is always with you. It affects your behavior, your mood and many of your attitudes, including your behavior at the pool table.

One day not so long ago you came down stairs for breakfast and there was coffee and juice waiting as it does most mornings. You took a sip of orange juice and said, “This stuff is horrible and warm. Can’t you at least keep it cold?” Your wife or your mother looked hurt and said nothing yet you knew you had hurt her feelings. Later, while driving to work you were sorry and you said to yourself, “I just wasn’t myself this morning. I will apologize later.” If you were not yourself, who were you? Who was it that made those nasty comments to someone you love and whose efforts you usually appreciate. Your unconscious was not pleased with something and because you were not on guard (on guard against what?) you just let your anger out. One way to think about those things we say and do that we did not “really” mean is that the unconscious slipped out. The unconscious is neither a bad guy nor a good guy; it is just a side of you that is not usually seen. Its general function is to protect you.

So how does this relate to playing pool? Well the unconscious also gets its feelings hurt; it gets angry and experiences all of the emotions. Whether you know it or not it is sensitive to your conscious criticism. When you call yourself “stupid” or use other derogatory terms you can set it off and it has a bad mood or a bad attitude. When riled the

unconscious can and does act on its feelings. At times you have done stupid things that hurt what you were trying to accomplish and then thought to yourself, “Why did I do that?” Usually we ignore this behavior as, “Just not me today.” And then we go on our way living with the aftermath of our self destructive behavior.

You have seen people exhibit sham anger that they did not believe. Earl Strickland comes to mind. Some people think that anger and aggression make them play better and, for some, it probably does. However, when you are really angry with yourself and call yourself names you are only hurting yourself and yourself will get even if the words are taken to heart. To play your best pool you need to be your own best friend. You need to understand that your subconscious and your unconscious are doing their best to help you win. If you don't take this tact you will pay the price with self defeating behavior.

We have all met the guy who is a loser at heart. He gambles until he loses and he always loses. This is a person with a problem too deep seated to address here but the idea is clear. While he says he wants to win, you and I know that he wants the punishment – so who is he really?

Pool is a mental game and it will do you much good to understand and use the mental processes available to each of us.

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