

# Mastering the art of concentration



# Preamble

The following psychological resource for participants and athletes, has been developed by sport psychologist Fiona McCarthy on behalf of the NSW Office of Sport, as a key initiative of the NSW Government's Future Champions strategy.

For more information on Future Champions, please visit [www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development](http://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development)

## Getting to know the author

Fiona McCarthy is a registered psychologist, specialising in sport psychology and is a member of the Australian Psychological Society and the Australian College of Sport and Exercise Psychologists. Fiona owns and operates Mind and Body Balance, a business she established 25 years ago.

Fiona is the Hunter Academy of Sport, Sport Psychology Consultant and a New South Wales Institute of Sport, Sport Psychology Service Provider. Over the last twenty-

five years, Fiona has assisted many teams, athletes, parents and coaches in the areas of confidence, concentration, handling pressure, motivation, goal setting, time management, performance preparation and general well-being. Fiona has worked with numerous sports, assisting recreational level athletes to professional, international, Olympic and Paralympic level athletes, reach their full potential.



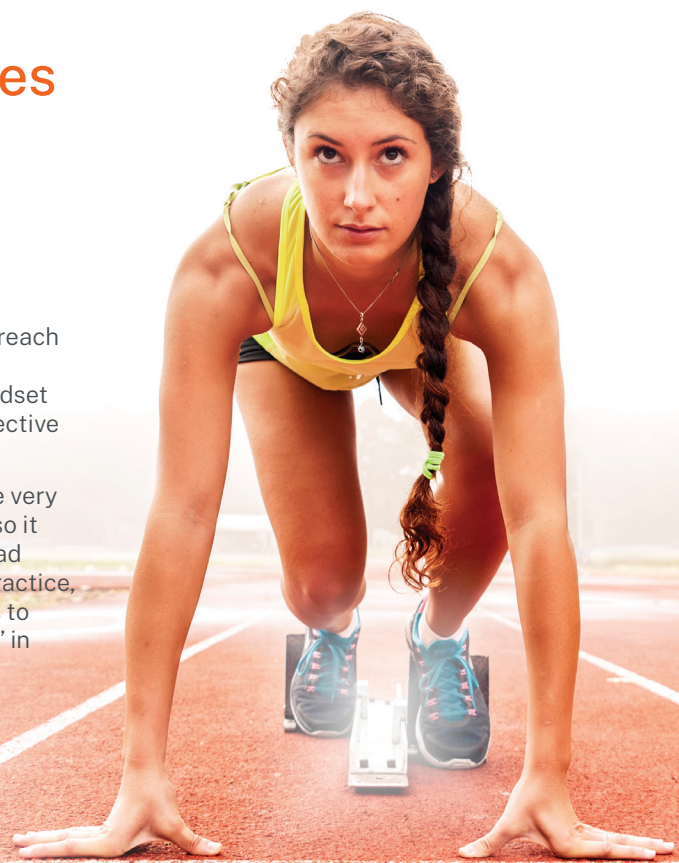
## Background to these resources

The importance of having a mental 'tool kit' to support your learning, performance and engagement on and off the sporting field.

The following resources have been developed by Fiona McCarthy to assist athletes at all levels, in understanding the importance of having a suite of mental 'tools' at their disposal. These 'tools' are practical and multidimensional and will help athletes learn and develop the necessary mental skills they require to help them navigate their way through their sporting journey with a positive mindset and achieve success on and off the field.

It is well recognised that to reach the pinnacle within sport, an athlete needs a superior mindset consisting of strong and effective mental skills and strategies.

Importantly, mental skills are very intertwined and integrated, so it is recommended that you read about and put into regular practice, a number of these resources to strengthen the 'mental tools' in your kit bag!





# Mastering the art of concentration –

the key to successful and consistent performances

Few athletes/players would doubt that the ability to focus one's attention on the right thing at the right time in order to complete the task at hand, is one of the most valuable and important mental skills to master.

The ability to focus or concentrate on **task relevant cues** (e.g., your ability to focus on the task at hand such as reading an incoming bowler in cricket or reading the game in basketball and executing your response 'in the moment' despite distractions such as the crowd) is a skill, therefore you need to learn it and regularly practice it.

Focusing on the present moment is the key! For example, a tennis player needs to focus on the shot they are making rather than focusing on what the score is.

## Some potential 'noise' or distractions that can affect your concentration

- Comments from other players/athletes
- The crowd or audience e.g., noise or distractions
- Coach-feedback and behaviour from the coach
- Feedback and behaviour from parents
- Feedback and behaviour of your peers
- Arguments with family, friends or your coach prior to a game
- Difficulties with school playing on your mind
- Fatigue - feeling tired and not energised
- Being injured
- Nervousness and anxiety
- Your self-doubts, negative self-talk and worries
- Dwelling on the past and zooming in too much on the future e.g., the hypothetical 'what- ifs'

You may have experienced periods of time during your training sessions and games when your mind felt "in sync" and flowing. Your energies were totally focused on the performance or task at hand, and you never thought about the score, or the crowd noises. This type of focus can allow you to perform at your best with consistency.

Therefore, it is important to establish your 'best' mindset in terms of concentration, to enable you to perform successfully and consistently.



**Below are some tips to help you with achieving your focus and positive mindset:**

- Develop your own **process goals** for both your training sessions and within competition. Process goals relate to goals that are like 'ingredients' to getting the outcome you want. For example, a swimmer may want to swim a particular time (which is an outcome), however process goals or ingredients needed to achieve this time, may involve having a better start or turn and being 'long and strong' in their freestyle stroke. The swimmer is best to focus on the aspects of their training session and race that they can control, and these include the processes necessary to get the outcome they desire, like their starts, turns and technique.
- Develop your own **plans and back up plans** – your plan 'B' and 'C'.
- Develop **routines** that work for you such as your warm-up routine or your post-event evaluation routine.
- Treat every performance as a new one.
- **Be in control**, don't rush.
- Be **process oriented** – Get back to basics, try to focus on the present moment ('here and now') and the processes 'key ingredients' needed to achieve the desired outcome. Focus on doing a key aspect of your sporting task. For instance, for a 100m sprinter it could be maintaining a strong arm action throughout the race or for a pace cricket bowler keeping their opposite arm up and maintaining balance in the run-up and delivery.
- Use your down time within your training sessions and within your competition event to **reset** your thoughts and actions.
- Combine your **relaxation** and **mental imagery** skills with your concentration skills.
- Write or **offload your thoughts** or worries on a piece of paper, or within your diary or in your phone or talk through them with someone you trust.
- Consider and work through some '**what-if** scenarios during training. Simulate some sessions using scenarios with the support of your coach, that addresses any concerns you may have for your upcoming competitions.
- Practise **mindfulness** and always 'reset' your focus to the task at hand or the present moment. Focus on the NOW.

Mindfulness is a powerful skill and strategy and allows you to centre and focus on the present moment. It helps to clear your mind and calm your body.

Practise focusing on the birds singing while going for a walk or as a 200 m runner you may focus on 'driving your arms ' if you are practising your starts for your 200m running event.



The consistent control of one's attentional focus before, and during games/competition requires regular practise, dedication and commitment just as much as your physical, technical and tactical skills.

# We hope you liked our tips

Have FUN building your psychological skills and strategies and put them into practice in and out of sport!

Remember importantly, if you are unsure of any of these tips or require further advice, please talk to your Coach, Parent or consult a Sport Psychologist.

You might like to check out our NEW animated YouTube video, Developing your mental 'tool kit' to support you in and out of sport featured within the NSW Office of Sport's Pathways and Development webpages @ <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development>.

Check out more tips for Participants @ <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development/social-and-recreational-sport-participants>

And our tips for Emerging and High-Performance Athletes @ <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development/emerging-athletes>



**Future Champions -  
Developing your  
mental 'tool kit' to  
support you in and out  
of sport.**

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