

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

The Mental Marksman

Tes Salb

The power of the mind is immeasurable. When allowed, it is capable of driving the body past its perceived limitations and can help create desired physical outcomes. Through training, the mind can become an individual's foremost tool in sports.

To some extent, athletes, business professionals, military personnel, and law enforcement officials all rely on different, specialized strengths, both mentally and physically; however, the training derived in one activity can oftentimes be carried over into others. In a discipline such as marksmanship, the mind is an important tool, and when utilized, can lead the shooter to the podium and beyond.

It is commonly believed that the outcome for skills such as marksmanship and archery are 80 percent mental and 20 percent physical. While these numbers could be argued depending on the situation at hand (combat vs. recreational or competitive target shooting), the mind is virtually limitless in its capabilities. Through mental training or visualization, an athlete can create a thought process that can reduce stress; increase confidence, self-awareness and control; lead to better form and faster improvements; help an individual perform more consistently; and lead to more desirable outcomes and greater success.

My first experience with mental training came at the age of 13 while attending an Olympic development clinic for modern pentathlon, an Olympic sport that puts athletes through a grueling, one-day test in the events of shooting, fencing, swimming, running, and horseback riding. But it was not until five years later while a freshman at the University of Notre Dame that I really experienced the power of mental training. Having put



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my pentathlon career aside to focus on my studies, I decided to continue shooting as long as possible since I had earned a spot on the U.S. National Shooting Team after winning the Junior Olympic Air Pistol National Championships the year before. Because of my team status, I was required to attend specific matches during the year, such as the Junior Olympics and the World Championship team tryouts.

While I understood the challenges that lay in front of me, my goal for the year was to get as close to maintaining my team status as possible despite not being guaranteed a place to train while earning my degree. After some negotiations and agreements with the university's athletic and security departments, I was granted permission to train with my air pistol three days during the year in a squash court in the athletic center. Understanding that the university was going above and beyond what most would, I was appreciative of its willingness to work with me. However, I also knew that with only three days of hands-on firearms training I would have to rely on visualization exercises to put me where I needed to be before the crucial matches. This not only tested my training skills (quality training over quantity) but brought me back to the mental basis of my preparation.

When I had first been introduced to mental imagery at the age of 13, the idea was very basic. I started learning to relax my entire body while attaining a blank or "quiet" mind. As my mental training advanced, I practiced imagining familiar places and activities while incorporating all of my senses. Eventually I took this to the firing line, where before a competition I would envision myself standing on the firing point, feeling even pressure in my feet, my legs steady, my body solid as if one with the floor. I would inhale deeply, filling my core, and then exhale and allow my entire body to settle into position. My imagery was so real that I could actually feel my finger on the trigger as I took up the first stage before slowly raising my arm up through the target and back down to my aiming point, even though I was actually sitting in a chair behind the firing line. With my eyes closed I could feel them focus on the front sight, seeing the sight picture as if I were truly behind the sights, as my pistol settled in my holding area, steadily



squeezing the trigger. The sound of the gun going off would resonate in my ears as I maintained focus on the front sight in my mind, imagining the bullet hitting the center of the target.

While mental imagery is a very important and useful tool, it alone can take an individual only so far. Before you can properly utilize mental training, you need strong fundamentals of technique, training, and conditioning for the task at hand. Since my summer had consisted of mostly physical training for shooting, I was able to utilize visualization while continuing to sense what it felt like to fire each round. Every night as I lay in bed I would fire a 40-shot match in my head, rehearsing what it was like to shoot one good shot after another. This allowed me to break down my physical training into the fundamentals of stance, stability, grip, trigger squeeze, sight alignment, and follow through, so that when I turned back to my visualization I was capable of envisioning and sensing the feel for the perfect shot. While my training situation was not ideal, it was enough to allow me to earn a bronze medal at the Junior Olympics and a spot on the 1998 World Championship and World Cup teams.

Over the years my visualization strategies and abilities have advanced, allowing me to add imagery between every round fired. I am now capable of visualizing my shot process with my eyes open without the interruption

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of conscious thoughts and have even taken this training outside the range. I use it quite often in CrossFit, especially during workouts such as the CrossFit Total, or when I am trying to set a personal record or simply having a bad day. Oftentimes when my body is challenged I find myself becoming anxious or my mind wandering elsewhere. In order to bring myself back to the task at hand I step away from whatever I may be trying to do and go back to my visualization. As I learned in shooting, if I am not 100 percent ready to fire a 10 when I get into position, it is a wasted round. Therefore, in workouts where I am attempting a personal best or know I will struggle, I take a step back and reset my frame of mind through visualization. While I know that my body and will are getting stronger through the WODs, I still attribute some of my recent improvements to visualization and mental training.

So, before you step up to the firing line, tackle a tough workout, or go for a personal record, take a few moments to get prepared with the following:

- **Relax.** Mental imagery is most effective when the individual is relaxed. Sit down in a chair or lie on the floor and close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths while focusing on releasing the tension from all your muscles, starting with your feet and moving up to the head. Continue breathing regularly and strive for a blank or “quiet” mind where no conscious thoughts enter your head. After you have achieved a quiet mind, start to visualize yourself in your surroundings going through the activity at hand.
- **Use Your Senses.** Become more self-aware and make the images more vivid by using your senses. Feel yourself going through the motions and feel the texture of your clothing, hear the sounds around you, think positive thoughts, and smell and even taste your surroundings. Create a more realistic sensory image by using all your senses as you continue to imagine executing the activity with perfection.
- **Take Control.** Work to control the images you see. Bring only positive thoughts to your mind; see



yourself as you want to perform. This is often easiest to do by visualizing yourself in your body, from an outside perspective, successfully performing the task.

- **Keep It Simple.** When you first start training your mind, keep it simple. Place yourself in an environment that has few distractions. Then practice by visualizing places or activities that are familiar and non-stressful. This will allow you to more fully develop mental skills while increasing confidence and self-awareness.
- **Use Your Sense of Feel.** Now see yourself in your body performing the movements required. Feel your muscles as you go through the motions. This will solidify the image and make it more realistic and therefore more effective.
- **Practice.** Just like any other movement in sports, mental imagery must be practiced to keep the skill sharp. Ten to 15 minutes a day is enough to keep you and your visualization at the top of your game.

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Mental imagery can be used for almost anything and is a great way to prepare for a big event, or even to get in a little extra training, especially if you're not able to get as much actual physical time on task as you'd like. The mental training process I've outlined here has worked well for me; however, it may not be the most effective for everyone as written. Each individual will have different requirements to make visualization to work for them, not to mention each activity. If you are new to this aspect of training, the process described here this is a good way to get started on your own road to visualization. From there, you can branch out to explore what works best for you, in your activity and circumstances. Different situations require different training, so use your skills and imagination to put together a mental training program that works for you.



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Tes Salb is the managing editor of the magazine [Shooting Sports USA](#), a National Rifle Association pistol instructor, a level-I CrossFit trainer, and a former member of the U.S. national shooting team. She is a 2001 graduate of the University of Notre Dame, where she fenced both epee and foil and played trumpet with the Band of the Fighting Irish. She was the lone member of Notre Dame's pistol team, earning a bronze medal in the 2000 NRA Intercollegiate Pistol Championships in air pistol and was a two-time First Team All-American. She was a member of the 1998 U.S. World Championship Shooting Team, has represented the U.S. in five World Cups and placed tenth in the 2000 Olympic Trials. Aside from shooting, she feeds her joy of multisport competition with CrossFit, sprint adventure races, and triathlons, completing her first Ironman in 2006. After taking some time off from the range, she plans to pursue her Olympic shooting aspirations for the 2012 Games.