

## Improving the use of your mental skills in cricket

Near the end of a close game of cricket, it will be the side that best handles the pressure that will win the game. Being able to handle the pressure in tight situations is where the mental skills of the players in the sides are most clearly illuminated. Will the batsman try to play a high risk, attacking shot to the wrong ball? Will the fieldsmen try to throw the stumps down at the bowler's end when there was little chance of the batsmen being run out and give away overthrows? Will the bowler fail to pitch the ball up into the blockhole and give the batsman the chance to hit a good length ball over the leg side field? All of these examples are not failures of technique, they are failures in the mental side of cricket. They are times when instead of continuing to build the pressure on the opposition and forcing them to take high risk options, we have released the pressure off them, usually resulting in them winning the game.

How can we improve our mental skills? Current thinking is that the key mental technique is visualisation. This is where you imagine your participation in future events in your mind, trying to make it as realistic as possible by including sights, sounds, emotions as well as the actions. One of the key elements of visualisation is to try to capture the sense of effortless concentration (being in the zone) that people mention when talking about times when they were performing at their very best. Apparently the more often we can capture this in our visualisation practice, the easier it becomes to get ourselves into this state when we are performing.

How do we practice visualisation? There are many moments during cricket practice where we can take a little time to practice visualisation. For example, you are waiting to go into the net for your batting session. You can watch each ball being bowled and visualise you making the shot to the ball. Imagine your footwork being quick and precise, your head being steady and in the best position to watch the ball onto the bat, the arc of the bat coming through the ball and the resulting motion of the ball off the bat. This can be applied to every ball, even to those where you have decided not to play a shot. It is as important to visualise your shot selection to each ball as it is to visualise the shot.

Visualisation can also be used while you are waiting for your turn to bowl in the nets. Look at the batsman's technique when facing the other bowlers. Imagine yourself bowling the ball which best exploits weaknesses in their technique. For example, a common fault in footwork is for batsmen to prod forward early to every ball, this leaves them exposed to balls that are a little bit shorter than a good length and moving away off the seam or through the air. Visualise yourself running in to bowl, holding the ball to bowl an outswinger, making the delivery action required to make the ball swing away, rubbing your fingers down the back of the seam as you let go of the ball to help stabilise the angle of the seam through the air, the ball travelling through the air and moving away late in its flight before landing just short of a good length with the batsmen stretching out and getting a thin outside edge as the ball goes past his bat.

Visualisation can be used in many aspects of cricket, for example: reducing the time required to implement the modification of your technique for a particular stroke; correcting a fault in your delivery of the ball when bowling; identifying the weight and placement of a shots into gaps in the field so that they result in easy runs; preparing for your innings during a tight match where you are going to be required to be effective at scoring runs as soon as you get to the wicket; etc. Why don't you work on adding improved visualisation skills to your cricket at Carey throughout the up-coming season.