

## Breathe in

Last week, television pundits pre-match the All-Ireland Club final, the Macrory Cup final, the McLarnon Cup final and the Rugby Schools Cup final, dwelt on the effects the occasion had on the nerves of players.

We all know there are players who associate high levels of physical (somatic) anxiety with poor performance (ie negatively) and consequently have difficulty gaining the appropriate physical activation state needed to start well and play well in the game.

Two common techniques used to reduce the symptoms of physical anxiety and gain a more relaxed state for playing are: (a) RHYTHMIC BREATHING and (b) CENTERING.

PHASE A: OUTSIDE THE COACHING SESSION

(a) RHYTHMIC BREATHING

(i) Explain to players how rhythmic breathing helps them cope with pressure to so perform better.

The amount of explanation given depends on the player (e.g. age, relevance, etc).

(ii) Have players place their hands on bottom of their rib cage and breathe in deeply (inhale) through the nose for a count of three. Have them hold their breath for another count of three before breathing out (exhale) through the nose for a final count of three. Repeat several times and ask them to feel (notice) the effect on their mental and physical state (e.g., calmer, more focused). As an extra, notice the difference in pulse rate before and after the exercise. Get them to try for different time ratios e.g., in for four, hold for two, out for five etc, as some prefer a longer/shorter pattern to gain relaxation. Remember you cannot inhale fully/effectively til you've fully exhaled.

(iii) To appreciate how breathing reduces high levels of physical anxiety/fatigue/exercise, have players do something physical, e.g. shuttles, running on spot, run up stairs to induce mild fatigue. Repeat the breathing exercise. This experience shows how rhythmic breathing restores quickly their recovery and their optimal physical state.

Try it for mental anxiety, e.g. asking a player to give a talk on some aspect of the game to others. It works just as great to reduce worrying situations.

(iv) Get them to brainstorm when they might use rhythmic breathing or centering in game situations e.g., before the start (throw-in, kick-off); before coming on as a sub; when the ball goes out of play; before a penalty; at fouls or injury; or at any point they need to gain control.

(v) Encourage them to practice regularly at home (e.g., between TV adverts) or at work. Anytime in fact to make good use of dead time.

(b) CENTERING

(i) as before explain how centering can help cope with pressure to perform better.

(ii) Stand with feet shoulder width apart and knees slightly bent. Relax neck, arms and shoulder muscles. Direct thoughts inward to check and adjust muscle tension and breathing. Best if focus is on abdominal muscles and how they tighten and relax as you breathe. Feel the heaviness in your muscles. Take a deep, slow nasal breath using the

diaphragm (point just behind your navel) with minimal movement of the chest. Focus consciously on breathing to clear your mind of all irrelevant thoughts and cues. Finish by thoughts on game ahead and what need to do.

(iii) As before brainstorm situations where need to center before encouraging practice at home and work.

#### PHASE B: WITHIN COACHING AND EVENTUALLY IN COMPETITION

'(1) Recreate the brainstormed situation in training and encourage use of both techniques, e.g. by a penalty competition or use my game 'Double or quits' which stimulates the pressure of taking frees and penalties in training

(ii) Initially players will need to be reminded to use the technique but over time they will become self-regulated and automatic, (second nature it is.) Even record when techniques were used and how successful they proved to be.

Pressure is normal in games and to help players cope with it simply start by having them breathe in.

Go on BREATHE IN!

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