

The Focus of a Champion, Part 1

BY CHOELEEN LOUNDAGIN, M.A.

How many times have you been told that you need to concentrate better or that you're just not focused? What did you do? You might have wrinkled your nose to make it look like you were concentrating more so you wouldn't be reprimanded again. Chances are this didn't help because you were concentrating on concentrating instead of on what you were doing.

But how many times have you actually been told *how* to concentrate or focus? For most people, the answer is never. Concentration, or attentional focus control, is a mental skill that needs to be learned, practiced and mastered just like any other mental or physical skill if you want to be the best skater you can be. This important mental skill involves:

- choosing your type of focus (that is, where to focus your attention)
- understanding how to deal with distractions in order to keep the appropriate focus
- being able to have the appropriate focus for the required time
- knowing how to shift from one focus to another when necessary

This article will explain the type of focus that will help you skate your best, and in next month's issue, you will learn how to keep that focus when faced with distractions.

choose the right focus

No matter what you are doing, there are four aspects of your focus that should never change. Your focus should be positive, in the present, centered on things that are under your control, and as simple as possible.

Positive. Make a habit of looking for the positives in every situation, and purposely focus on those points. Also, focus on what you want to do instead

of what you want to avoid. For example, if you need to focus on keeping your right side up on an element, focus on keeping it up instead of focusing on not dropping it down.

Present. Keep your focus in the here and now, because you have no control over the past or what happens in the future. While you're skating, stay focused on the element you are doing, or, if you just finished an element, stay focused on what you are preparing to do next. In other words, take one element at a time. You should not let your focus jump too far ahead of what you are doing or get stuck on something that already happened.

If you allow your focus to stay on a mistake in the past, you are likely to get frustrated, make another mistake, lose more of your focus, get more frustrated, make additional mistakes, and so on. This can happen because mistakes are more likely when you are tense from reacting to frustration and when you are not focused on what you are doing. Even doing something fantastic can cause problems if you lose your focus by celebrating before your performance is over.

Focusing too far into the future can be equally devastating. Problems can arise if your most difficult element is in the middle of your program and you focus on it in the beginning of your performance. Focusing on the future often creates mental anxiety along with physical tension.

Control. You will skate your best when you focus on things that are under your control. Focus on whatever you can do to achieve what you are striving for at that given moment. Your technique, effort, thoughts, emotions and energy level are some things that you can control. Things that are not

under your control include the past, the future, competition results, passing a test, competitors, parents, coaches, the audience, poor judging, a grueling event schedule, jet lag, altitude, obnoxious people, and unforeseen changes at an event.

Though you may not have control of everything, you can always control your reaction to them. Keep in mind that many skaters have been disappointed because they were so focused on their placement or competitors that they forgot to focus on what they were doing.

Don't give your competitors that power over your performance. As long as your competitors don't sneak out on the ice and get in your way while you perform (I have never heard of this happening), they have nothing to do with how well you can skate unless you focus on them instead of yourself. Making comparisons, assuming they are better or more prepared than you, and focusing on beating others instead of doing your best gives your competitors power over your performance that they don't really have. To avoid this mistake, think of skating with the other skaters, and compete only against yourself by challenging yourself to skate your personal best.

Simple. The fewer things you focus on at one time, the better you will skate. When learning a new skill or improving another one, select one or two things to focus on at once. Try to focus on technical cues and/or feelings and sensations in your muscles. Before attempting the skill, think of the desired focus and imagine yourself doing the skill correctly, and then physically repeat what you saw automatically. Once you do the skill correctly, try to re-create the same focus and feeling. When doing a learned skill, focus on simple technical

cues or re-create the correct feeling as if on autopilot. In other words, let your body do what you already trained it to do.

make focusing easier

Aside from distractions, stress and fatigue are the two primary factors that can interfere with your focus. These factors can be mental, physical or both. By staying aware of these factors and dealing with them immediately, you can make it easier to focus like a champion.

Stress. Mental and physical stress interfere with your ability to focus by disturbing the messages your brain and body send to each other. If you notice any stress in the form of worries and/or muscular tension, do a relaxation technique (such as ribcage breathing) to release the stress. Make it a habit to clear your mind of any extra thoughts prior to skating, especially before taking a lesson or performing. This is a simple, yet highly effective way to make focusing easier. Think of it as checking your worries at the door so that your mind is ready to work when you take the ice.

Fatigue. Mental and physical fatigue also interfere with your ability to focus.

If you feel physically tired but must go on, avoid focusing on your fatigue by using an energizing technique (such as powerful imagery) to help you refocus on the task. If you're mentally tired, you may find yourself easily distracted and more likely to make mistakes because of an inappropriate focus. This will make you waste physical energy as well because with the wrong focus it takes more effort to complete a task. If you are mentally fatigued, you must refocus by releasing any unnecessary thoughts or distractions. Follow up with an energizing technique (such as reviewing your daily goals) and refocus on the task.

prepare and just have fun!

Use your off-ice warm-up to prepare both your mind and your body to skate. Focus on your muscles getting warm as you narrow your focus and direct your energy toward what you are doing each moment.

Before you step on the ice, clear your mind of everything except the purpose for the day. Check in with yourself throughout practice and events to see if you are focusing on what is most effective for your goals. Instead of focusing

on what you can't do, what you can't control or what isn't working, focus on what you can do, what you can control and what is working.

To make it even easier to keep the focus of a champion, have fun when you skate, love what you do and enjoy each moment as much as possible. Approaching skating and other endeavors in this way will help you stay relaxed and expect the best from yourself. Every moment in which you focus on something out of your control, especially if it is a potential stressor, robs you of the positive energy and effort you could put toward doing your best.

In the next issue you will learn how to deal with distractions so you can stay focused and enjoy consistently skating your best! ■

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2005 Sports Sciences and Medicine Workshop

BY JULIET NEWCOMER

"This workshop was incredibly helpful in determining ways to improve all aspects of my training."

— Pilar Bosley, ice dancer

In early May, 28 skaters and their coaches or trainers converged on the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs for the fifth annual U.S. Figure Skating Sports Sciences and Medicine Workshop. Skaters were selected based on their placement or team's placement at the 2005 State Farm U.S. Figure Skating Championships and 2005 U.S. Synchronized Skating Championships.

Run by the Sports Sciences and

Medicine Committee, the workshop tests individual athletes in various areas of strength, conditioning and health in order to provide the athletes with information that will help them excel. Skaters and coaches also attend lectures on periodization, core training, injury prevention, nutrition and psychology, and all athletes receive a one-on-one appointment with a sports medicine faculty member.

The workshop also provides U.S. Figure Skating with data and trends for elite novice and junior athletes.

strength testing

Faculty: Kat Arbour, Michael Cook and Amy Schneider, with

assistance from Joy Anderson and Mark Stevenson

The faculty looked at strength, flexibility, balance and weight training technique. Overall, athletes were stronger than in the past, but core strength was still a weakness. It was also noted that the novice men were comparatively much weaker than the male novice pairs skaters. The faculty suggested various core exercises and also discussed the importance of supervised off-ice training with proper technique.

musculo-skeletal testing

Faculty: Jen Burke, Donna Flowers, Judy Holmes, Roger Kruse and Donna Merkel

Balance, strength and flexibility were evaluated during the musculo-skeletal sessions. In addition, Jenifer Mason analyzed each skater's bone density, while Linda Tremain evaluated boots and blades.

Although more skaters now have off-ice programs and are better educated, skaters whose on-ice coaches acted as strength trainers were markedly weaker than those who worked with certified professionals in strength and conditioning.

Musculo-skeletal assessments also showed a lack of lower abdominal strength and control. Hamstring and quad flexibility were improved over past years, but the hips were generally tight, with the right hip tighter than the left in most skaters. Areas of tightness or weakness usually corresponded to areas of recent injury.

exercise induced asthma (EIA) testing

Faculty: Randy Wilber and Karen Daigle

All athletes were tested for Exercise Induced Asthma (EIA). Thirty percent of the group tested positive for EIA, which is on par with last year's results. Athletes who tested positive were provided with suggestions for controlling the condition.

psychology

Faculty: Sean McCann and Alison Arnold

Athletes attended seminars and could sign up for one-on-one appointments with Dr. Arnold. Skaters are becoming more accepting and interested in mental training, but they are still not doing enough on their own time.

nutrition

Faculty: Page Love

Skaters attended small group lectures and had one-on-one nutrition appointments. Love had the skaters complete a nutrition questionnaire prior to attending the camp. Skaters

demonstrated an increased knowledge of the importance of good nutrition in injury prevention and improved performance. They were also eating a healthier diet overall than in previous years.

biomechanics filming

Faculty: Sarah Smith, Debbie King, Pieter Kollen, Erik Schulz

Singles and pairs skaters were able to have various jumps and throws filmed, and they were provided with feedback on their technique and a CD of their jumps. One of the pairs teams was able to land its throw triple loop for the first time two days after returning home because of the feedback they received.

force plate testing

Faculty: Bill Sands

For the first time, workshop participants were tested on a portable force platform at the USOC. This is the first group of figure skaters who were tested on this equipment, so at this point it is not possible to identify trends.



The faculty at the 2005 Sports Sciences and Medicine workshop



Up-and-coming young skater Pilar Bosley works on the balance mat.

Skaters are showing improvements in virtually all areas, and the Sports Sciences and Medicine Committee, along with the Athlete Development and Coaches Committees, will continue to work together to ensure that future programs meet the needs of our skaters. ■



Athletes work on core body strength. As in previous years, it was learned that core strength was one of the athletes' weakest areas.