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## Focus: understanding scanning and switching off

Whether I have worked with Gymnasts, Footballers, Table Tennis Players or Triathletes, one thing has become clear, they all need to focus their attention on different cues at different times. When we think of the concept of focus the following terms are key, internal, external, narrow and broad (Weinberg & Gould, 2003).

Focus of attention in sport is often linked to how we can help athletes build towards specific performances, outcomes or results. So, what is realistic in terms of our expectations about focus, what athletes focus on? How focused they are and how long can they maintain that focus?

Sport environments provide athletes with a variety of choices in terms of what they decide to spend their conscious effort on. With all the choices and the amount of information that is available, it is no wonder that a lack of concentration or focus is identified when performances or results are poor. But the challenge is understanding the direction and application of an athletes focus, and understanding the athletes need in relation to focus so we know when they need to switch off and relax.

Many people think of focus as concentrating on one thing for a long time. However, focus is the ability to attend to internal and external cues in your attentional field whilst also understanding times when you need to focus on one cue or several cues.

When working with athletes we need to help them understand the various options available to them in terms of where they focus their attention. Within this, an important skill is 'scanning', this is where athletes can understand and utilise the various attention options to ensure they match the environment they are in and outcome they are aiming to achieve. Here are two examples of scanning:



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- An example in football would be a defender assessing the whole pitch environment to ensure they are in the right position to deal with any threats from the oppositions attacking players. This is an external focus as it relates to things outside of the athlete but also a broad focus as there are many cues that they are attending to. The same defender may then be faced with a one-on-one with an attacker so they internalise and narrow their focus to executing the skill of tackling or holding that player up.
- A gymnast in a practice environment is taking the time to mentally rehearse a specific movement that they are about to undertake. This is an internal focus as it is the athlete's thoughts, feelings and movements, it is also a narrow focus as it is one specific skill that they are attending to. They may then scan to an external focus when the coach is providing them with feedback, and they are observing someone else executing that skill.

Here are two points to conclude that may help you in the future when you are thinking about your focus during practice or competition:

- Allow yourself the opportunity to scan between different cue types, this variability will help you understand more about yourself and your environment that you are practicing or competing in.
- 100% focus, 100% of the time may prove to be an unrealistic target, you may find that you become more effective at focusing on the right cues if you allow yourself some switch off time.



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