

FOCUS: TEAM EXERCISE

To complete this exercise, partner-up and find a ball you can pass back and forth. *A single-athlete alternative to this exercise can be completed by shooting free throws or hitting a tennis ball against a backstop.*

ROUND ONE: Stand at a distance where passing the ball is unchallenging, but still requires some effort (10-15 yards for high school athletes should be sufficient).

Begin by throwing the ball back and forth for long enough to develop a rhythm (2-3 minutes), then stop.

ROUND TWO: Create a mental checklist, or have your coach announce focus points that are relevant to the task, and resume the passing drill while focusing your attention on one or more of those focus points. Relevant focus points may include: the ball, your target (your partner), or your mechanics. Continue the exercise for 2-3 minutes, then stop.

ROUND THREE: Create another mental checklist, or have your coach announce focus points that are irrelevant to the task, and resume the drill while you think about one or more of those focus points. Irrelevant focus points may include: the temperature, the sound of passing cars, your hunger or thirst, your plans after practice, or “not screwing up.” Continue the exercise for 2-3 minutes, then stop.

(Coaches may also simulate sensory distractions like crowd noise. What’s important is that the athlete focuses his or her attention on some form of distraction for this round of the exercise).

REFLECTION: Reflect on the performative differences between second and third round. Was it harder to pass the ball accurately? Harder to catch the ball reliably? Were there more drops or miscues?

Reflect on the mental differences. Did you feel more detached from the task during the “irrelevant” round? Did you find yourself shifting your focus from the irrelevant focus point to a relevant one (e.g. the ball) in order to make a catch or direct a pass?

BRIEF: Even if the distinctions were minor, how (and to what) we direct our attention impacts our performance, either positively or negatively. Selective attention works in much the same way. If we choose to focus on information relevant to the task at hand, the mind will trigger the body to perform more optimally. If we allow our focus to land on irrelevant thoughts or stimuli, our mind might miss the triggers it needs to perform consistently. What we select to be processed by our minds, whether productive or destructive to performance, is dictated by where we guide our focus.