



THE TRAINING GROUND

Training Attention in our Athletes

By Dr. Rachel Lindvall

“Pay attention!” “Focus!” “Listen up, please!” As a coach of any age athlete, you probably find yourself using these phrases in training. There is plenty of blame to go around for our athlete’s lack of focus or attention, but what can we do about it?

Attention is a limited commodity but is also trainable. Most of our athletes have unknowingly trained their brains to follow any distraction. This leaves us frustrated, trying to hold their attention long enough to successfully complete a training session. But how do we help our athletes re-train their brain? Brain training begins with awareness. We can’t fix something we don’t know is broken. Try this for a moment: pause, close your eyes, and just notice where your brain is going right now. It might be making a checklist of things you need to get done, or what you have coming up tomorrow. It may be replaying a conversation you had earlier today. Likely, it is not focused solely on this article. As you notice where your brain is going, imagine you are watching these events play out on TV. Simply observe where your brain is going without getting wrapped up in the thought. With each thought that you notice, observe it, and then bring your attention back to the feeling of your breath entering and exiting your lungs or the feeling of your feet on the floor.

Awareness of our thoughts allows us to notice when we are not focused on the present moment, or the task at hand. The sooner we notice our brain is elsewhere, the sooner we can bring it back into focus. The more we practice, the better we become.

Present moment focus brings us to the topic of mindfulness. Mindfulness is simply paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, in a non-judgmental way. So, what is so important about present moment focus? Let’s go back to the beginning of this article. You are trying to explain an exercise and your athletes are not paying attention. You call them out, and inevitably the response is, “I am paying attention!” But in reality, our attention is limited, it cannot be expanded, merely divided. That being said, when we multi-task, we lose a little bit of attention with each activity we add. That doesn’t mean multi-tasking is always bad but know that with each added task the amount of attention we can put into each area diminishes. Now think about when you have been in the zone as an athlete or when you hear athletes talk about being in the zone. Usually, they will say they weren’t even thinking; everything was just happening

easily and in flow. If the same athlete began following every distracting thought that entered their head in that moment, they would cease to be in the zone.

So, what do we do with distracting thoughts? Distracting thoughts are just that, distracting. They are taking us away from the thing we want to pay attention to. We can't necessarily stop distracting thoughts, but we do get to choose which thoughts we give our attention to. Think about being at an event where many conversations are going on around you. If you are deeply invested in the conversation you are having, you most likely won't even notice the conversations going on near you. The conversations are still there, but they aren't distracting you. Sometimes you may have to work harder to stay engaged with the conversation you are in, but you are capable of doing it. Just like with anything, the more we practice this the better we will become.

The next piece of mindfulness is "non-judgement". This can feel strange, because it feels like we are letting ourselves off the hook. When in reality, non-judgement reduces the number of things we are giving our attention to. Think of it this way, your athlete hits the crossbar on what should have been a gimme goal. They are so frustrated that they fall to the ground, pounding it with their fist. Meanwhile, the game is still going on around them. You are most likely yelling from the sideline for them to get up and get back in the game. This scenario mirrors what occurs with our thoughts. If we have a thought that isn't helping us or we don't want to be there, we can take ourselves out of the play by beating ourselves up over this thought. Maybe we are replaying a previous mistake, reminding ourselves what an idiot we must be for making the mistake. The time we spend on this thought is time we could be using to make ourselves better. That doesn't mean we don't evaluate and learn from the past, but there is a big difference between objectively evaluating and ruminating. When we have a thought that is not helping us, simply noticing it is there, choosing whether it deserves our attention or not, without judging ourselves for having that thought, allows us to put more time and attention into thoughts that help us learn and perform at our best. Noting that the thought is there, but not allowing ourselves to get wrapped up in it is the equivalent of walking past a swimming pool, noticing it is there, but not jumping in. We can train our brains to do the same thing.

Now, back to your training session. Think about the things that are often distracting your athletes; it could be life outside of soccer, a previous mistake, or worry about the future (the team you play next is "really good"). If your athletes train their brains to keep a present moment focus, when thoughts about the past or future, or anything unrelated to the session race through their brain, they can give themselves permission to note the thoughts, but not need to get wrapped up in them. They don't need to jump in the pool.

How can we help them train their brain this way? Just like with physical training, it takes time and repetition. However, it can be completed in short bouts of time and incorporated into each training session. A simple first step is starting training sessions with a question of the day that has nothing to do with soccer. For example, would they rather own an aquarium or a zoo? If your team warms up together, this question can be given to them at the beginning with instructions to think about it for the first 30-seconds and then share with the person or persons near them why they chose their answer. Why is this mindfulness/attention practice? It takes their brains away from the various other distractions they brought to training and aligns them on the same topic. Putting their attention onto something they probably would not have spent time thinking about creates a reset. Now that that you have them thinking in a similar direction, it is easier to transition them to a common focus of your training session.

A second brain training activity is taking 30-seconds and completing any of the following: notice how the air feels in their lungs as they breathe in and out, notice what sounds they hear around them, notice what they feel on their skin (contact with the grass, warm or cool air, etc), or scanning through their body from their toes to their head, noticing what they feel or don't feel, or what feels heavy or light. When they observe their brain wandering to something else, remind them to just note the thought and bring their attention back to their area of focus. This activity can grow from 30-seconds to a minute, to two minutes, and can be used anytime during training. These activities can be used to lower heartrate and increase mental clarity in high pressure or emotional situations. Teaching your athletes to use focusing on their breath or noticing sounds they hear or how their feet feel in their cleats can help bring their brain back to the present moment, allowing them to re-enter the zone.

Research shows that as little as three minutes of mindfulness training three times a week can create lasting change in the way we think. Even greater results with 10 minutes a day, five days a week. Incorporating short mindfulness techniques in the beginning, middle, and end of your training session can easily reach these standards, creating lasting change in the attention of your athletes.

Adjusting anything in our training routine can feel challenging at first, but in your next training session, notice how much time you spend getting your team's attention, or re-explaining a training exercise. In addition, notice how much time your athletes spend recovering mentally from a mistake, or worrying about something in the future. Wrestling with a new routine that incorporates mindfulness techniques will pay off not only in holding your athletes' attention in training, but research shows growth in confidence, reduced performance anxiety, less fear of failure, and lower perceived stress, to name a few.

The educator in me can't help but conclude our time together with some key takeaways:

1. Attention is limited but trainable
2. Present moment focus improves attention
3. We have the power to choose which thoughts we give our attention to
4. Attention training can start with 30-seconds of directed present moment focus
5. Small, consistent changes can have powerful results

Thank you for spending some of your precious attention with me today and I look forward to discussing more tools you can use to improve your athletes' mental game in future articles.

Have questions? Reach out: Rachel@DrRachelLindvall.com