

FOCUSING AND CONCENTRATION

By Dr. Gary R. Low, Ph.D.



OKAY. IT'S TIME TO CLEAR your mind because we are going to talk about some serious darts! Being able to focus and concentrate, consistently and at the right times is at the heart of improving your game. Conventional wisdom indicates that you must practice, practice, practice, and then concentrate, concentrate, concentrate in order to improve competitive play. True, but conventional wisdom does not tell you how to achieve this desired state of concentration. This article will help in discovering ways to actually clear your mind by learning, understanding and practicing the skills of "Focusing and Concentration."

In order to truly focus and concentrate you must have a clear mental picture of your expected performance on each trip to the line. You must be clear on exactly what you have to do before you attempt to do it. Often this means that you have to refocus and adjust your mental strategy after each dart is thrown. Most dart players are not accustomed to doing this because they simply do not know how to do this during a tough match. An essential self-mastery skill is focusing or the ability to concentrate on the task you are about to perform. An excellent supportive skill is Positive Self-Talk which we covered in the previous issue.

Dart matches are usually played in environments filled with distractions and all kinds of interruptions. Mix in the ingredients of stress, pressure, tension, expectation, plus a tough opponent and

you get the most difficult and wonderful sport in the universe ... DARTS! When you encounter these elements and/or become confused it is much better to stop and plan your next throw rather than just continuing. In darts, every throw counts and you really cannot afford to waste a dart. Focusing involves knowing exactly what you want to throw and removing all distraction as you mentally and visually concentrate on the precise area of the board. Targeting each throw is an essential part of Focusing and Concentration.

Darts is a very individual and stylish sport. Each person develops a unique style and rhythm of throwing darts. For some, rhythm is fast; they throw all three darts rapidly. Others have a very deliberate and slow rhythm which separates each throw from the last one. Regardless of style, you will want to build a procedure of focus and concentration into your game. Practice dealing with interruptions and distractions during your practice sessions and in competitive play. Skills require practice and Focusing and Concentration is an intricate, subtle and powerful mental skill.

The best procedure for developing focus and concentration involves identifying specific situations that are distracting and difficult for you to handle. This procedure is called "Identifying Personal Distractors." Some of the common distractors are outlined (see box) along with corrective and focusing techniques

for each distractor.

You can add to this list other special distractions and corrective thoughts/actions and helpful focusing responses. Rehearse the skill of focusing and concentration as you practice and play in competitive situations. Anticipate using this in difficult situations. You will find this exercise to be valuable and a good investment of time and energy.

As you play darts at any level, in essence you are playing two games. The *inner or mental game* is played inside your own head. This game is played against opponents which include lack of confidence, poor concentration, inability to focus, anger, fear, nervousness, etc. This is where the psychological and self-mastery skills are so helpful and essential. The *outer game* is how you actually perform and play your opponent with each throw. This is where the fundamental and technical skills of stance, grip, throw and release, follow-through, and counting/game strategy are so helpful and essential.

The mental or inner game is where the
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Distractor	Corrective Thoughts and Actions	Helpful Focusing Responses
Tense approaching the line	Preparatory calming, relaxation training.	Check body for tension, breathe easily, relax stance.
Dart bouncing back from wire.	Refocus on target, not on fallen dart.	Visualize target. Use self-talk, i.e. "Right back at it" or "One more time."
Noisy people in crowded throwing area.	Positive self-talk, focusing on fundamental skills.	"The height of the board and the throwing distance are the same. Focus only on the playing area and the board."
High level of tension on the finishing out.	Positive self-talk. "This is what I have worked for—a chance to win."	"Now is the time for my best darts." "Focus and concentrate." "I will use the extra tension to help my accuracy."
Dart hitting your face on your release or the darts slipping from your hand.	Check fundamentals. Refocus for next throw. Breathe.	Reposition stance. Remind yourself that you need just one good dart to get back on track. "Just one."
First dart breaks down a favorite double out. For example a d18 is needed and you hit a fat 18.	Calculate and target your next throw. Breathe.	Visualize the new target. "Now I'll go directly at the number."

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vast majority of dart matches are won and lost. The key to success and mastery of your inner game is concentration. Clear your mind and focus on this next statement. Contrary to what you have learned in the past, concentration is not staring at something hard or intensely trying to concentrate. Concentration is not thinking hard about something. Good concentration is effortless and relaxed, not tense and intensely purposeful. Think of concentration as relaxed alertness.

What you want to achieve as you play darts is a state of relaxed concentration, smooth movements and constant shifts of heightened focus. To achieve and maintain this state you need to use a full arsenal of mental skills, methods and techniques to avoid or minimize distractions, mind chatter (negative self-talk) and disruptive thoughts. Use your inner game to help your outer game performance by using inner words and reminders as you play. Using these new techniques and thinking behaviors will deepen concentration and relaxation as you play. Many dart players describe this process as finding and being "in a groove or zone."

NOW once again clear your mind. You will notice that other self-mastery skills (like Positive Self-Talk) contribute to self-control and performance in darts. They all build on each other and help you to reach the next level of competitive play and enjoy the game even more. However, as you develop and improve your ability to focus (see) and concentrate (relax), you will see your performance improve. Focusing and Concentration are two of the most important of the psychological and self-mastery skills.

Remember, clear your mind, relax, visualize your target and throw. Sometimes an empty mind is a good thing.

GOOD DARTS!



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