

# Achieving your goals?



**It's all in  
the mind**



Cognitive  
hypnotherapist  
**Trevor Silvester**  
examines the way in  
which mind power  
can work for and  
against our most  
talented sportspeople

**If you have ever** seen an elite athlete up close - whether it be on the football field, the athletics track or the courts of Wimbledon, the first thing you probably notice is their toned physique, their speed and astonishing grace – far beyond the realms of us normal mortals. However, there are deeper factors that play just as significant a part in sporting success at the highest level – mental strength and the way the brain responds to the demands and stress of the Olympic 100 metre final or the crucial penalty shootout.

As a cognitive hypnotherapist, I deal in the realities our brains create in response to a range of situations. In simple terms, I work out why one person runs away from a dog that someone else is happily stroking, or why someone speaks confidently in one context but feels a complete fool in others. It is only by uncovering the pattern behind the behaviour that it is possible to help effect real change.

Many highly skilled sportspeople are let down by their mental processes. Take Chelsea's John Terry, an experienced and talented footballer who missed a crucial penalty in the European Cup Final. It

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seems inconceivable that someone earning what he does for being able to kick a ball should miss a target in a position that most 12 years olds could score from. So, what went wrong? I suggest it was his mind, not his eyes or his feet that let him down. In fact, this is something we've seen many times before, with the likes of Tim Henman, Jana Novotna (unkindly dubbed the lady from Chokeoslovakia), Greg Norman - and any England football player called to take a penalty. So what turns a superb athlete into a choker and what can be done about it?

### **Every action has a consequence**

In any situation, your brain (in simplistic terms your unconscious thought) is working out the likely consequences of the actions you are about to take. It then selects the one most likely to bring you the result it believes is most beneficial to you. If the calculation your brain makes is negative, it releases chemicals into your body that were originally intended to protect you from sabre-toothed tigers. They increase your heart rate, your respiration, stop digestion and, if strong enough, shut down those parts of your brain responsible for logical, considered thinking.

This puts you into a state best described as a trance. Not one that will make you dance like a chicken, but which may cause you to sky the ball over the cross bar, or forget your name in an interview. Anyone who's ever felt 'hijacked' at such moments will know what I'm describing, a loss of feeling in control – truly, strong emotions make us stupid. It's this fight or flight response that causes someone to run from a friendly dog, shake in front of an interview panel, or fluff a shot at match point, all because our brain looks at the present situation and calculates the likely consequence. As you stand ready to make your serve, do you foresee an ace, or the laughter of your friends as you hit yourself on the head? As you stand to make a sales pitch do you foresee an enthusiastic reception, or a mass of shaking heads?

### **The time and the place**

Context is highly significant: you may be cool as a cucumber serving for the championship at Wimbledon, but a nervous wreck at the prospect of speaking at the press conference afterwards. This is because the meaning of the present situation you're in (whether it's good or

bad), and its anticipated outcome is determined by calculations the brain makes based on your past.

So if the brain creates a version of reality that causes people to underperform, what can you do about it? Most people try to wrest control back from the brain and 'deliberately' serve, or kick, or run. In other words we try to consciously perform an action that is so practised it's almost completely unconscious - and make a hash of it. In actual fact, we need to leave our unconscious to perform the actions we've practised.

### **1 Anchoring**

Has a record ever come on the radio that reminded you of a past event and left you feeling a particular emotion? These are called anchors and work on the stimulus-response mechanism first identified by Pavlov. Basically the principle is that if, at the moment you're experiencing a strong emotion, a stimulus is paired with it (a song playing, a group of people watching you, a dog running at you), then the two become wired together in your neurology and one will trigger the other off in you. Those examples were negative, but they can also be used beneficially by pairing a stimulus or trigger with an emotion relevant

to your performance. A powerful trigger is a smell because the response to it can't be controlled – even if you know something is going to smell bad you'll still recoil from it.

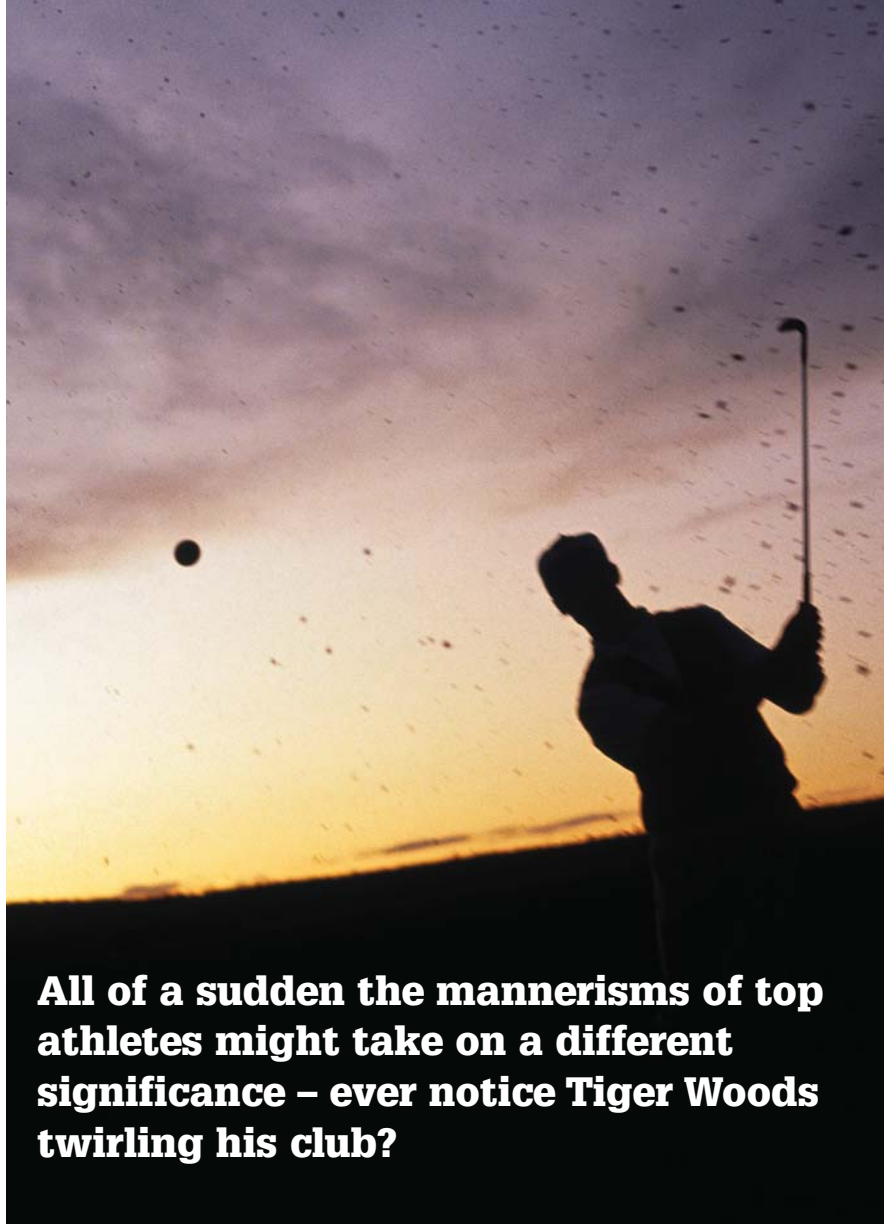
British athletes have used this technique for some time. During training, whenever they get into a good performance state – run a personal best, feel full of energy or confidence – they'll focus on their feeling and inhale a smell that's impregnated on a wrist band. The smell itself is usually just something they like, although some natural products have been shown to have particular effects (peppermint improves short-term recall). They'll continue to 'stack' these states over a period of time so the smell becomes strongly evocative of the emotional state that accompanies a good performance. On the big day, before serving, or settling into the blocks, or taking a penalty they take a deep breath and reaccess the positive state. Try it. Songs are another good trigger, and physical pressure like squeezing a finger and thumb also work well. All of a sudden the mannerisms of top athletes might take on a different significance – ever notice Tiger Woods twirling his club?

## 2 Think positive

If I tell you not to think of a blue tree what happens? If I tell you not to think of missing that penalty... the problem is that the brain has to process a negative; it has to think of the blue tree to not think of a blue tree. A key maxim in any situation where you want to perform well is to think it how you want it. Before a game, rehearse how you want it to go, see yourself performing well – make it a picture where you see yourself in it, rather than through your own eyes - research shows this technique makes it more compelling. Fall asleep thinking of a positive aspect of your performance because it will prime you to notice your qualities and not your faults. If you play a sport where you have a moment to prepare, like tennis, golf or set pieces in football or rugby, then 'play forward' the next thing you're going to do in your mind – while firing your performance anchor – precisely the way you want it. So, as John Terry approaches the penalty spot he pauses, takes a deep breath of his wrist band, and sees himself running up and placing the ball in a precise part of the goal. It will probably help if he closes his eyes so the goalie doesn't get a clue from where he's looking. Repeat that rehearsal until the effect of the anchor feels strong and then take the shot, make the swing or sprint off the blocks.

## 3 The power of imagination

Imagination is one of your most powerful tools. I work with the mind/body connection everyday and know its power, but you don't have to take my word for it. Researchers have found that when imagining doing bench presses every



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day, elderly people actually got stronger – and put on muscle! Imagine that, changing your body shape just by thinking. This idea is further supported by an experiment in which basketball players of equal ability were separated into three groups. One group practised shooting hoops, one imagined shooting hoops and one sat around reading magazines. After the allotted time they were put back on the court and their ability reassessed. Who do you think had improved the most? Those who imagined, because they sat and rehearsed shooting perfect baskets and their mirror neurons – neurons which imitate the actions of others (and in our imagination we trick the brain into treating ourselves as an 'other') stored this 'map' of shooting a hoop and used it when it was next performed physically. Those who'd physically practised failed on some of their efforts, so the map was more flawed. Practice doesn't make perfect, it makes permanent, so make sure that what is being made permanent in your muscle memory is the best possible representation of your skill. Set aside 10 minutes a day to mentally rehearse key aspects of your game. As before, see yourself doing it – you have to represent yourself to your brain as an 'other'

– and really focus. That's why I suggest doing it for no more than 10 minutes, any longer and your concentration will drift.

There are many other things that modern psychology can teach us in order to improve our performance, and often they come from unrelated fields of study. One thing is for sure, in any contest between evenly matched opponents it's going to be the mind factor that makes a difference – especially against someone who is physically superior to you. So if you want to make headway in your sporting skills, do your head work first. You may never win an Olympic gold – but you may surprise yourself by what you can achieve with the right mental attitude. **UF**



Trevor Silvester runs the Quest Institute ([www.questinstitute.co.uk](http://www.questinstitute.co.uk)) which specialises in cognitive hypnotherapy and NLP, offering accredited training courses to people from all walks of life, as well as running a practice in Harley Street.