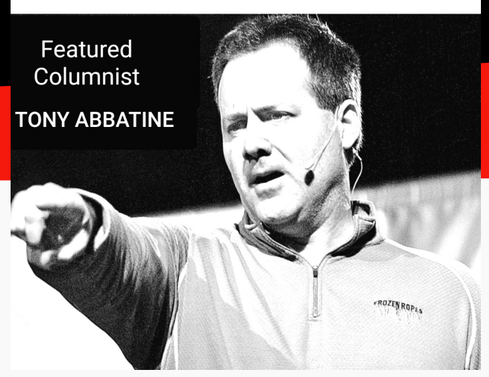
Baseball America

You Play With Your Eyes: Visual Psychology Wins The Prize



By Tony Abbatine on September 19, 2019

During a recent college baseball visit, I was asked to define the term "visual psychology" to the coaching staff, faculty and players in attendance. Rather than sounding like a college professor and giving a neuro-cognitive lecture on how the eyes are the only external part of the brain, my response was simple.

“Visual psychology is about performance strategies, but only for athletes who play with their eyes open."

After the group chuckled, the real discussion started as I shared my journey from traditional sports psychology teachings to the more encompassing and player-friendly study of visual psychology. I shared the friendly debate the legendary Ken Ravizza and I would regularly have on the topic, including my line, "Ken, you want the players to feel good, but I want them to see great."

Relaxation, visualization, affirmations, mediation and other mental skills tools were all a solid starting point, but the performance puzzle seemed to be missing something. Athletes needed more ammunition to help them understand how vision was tied into mindset.

What was the bridge to go from the mental "tools" to the visual challenges of the games? For me, the eyes—attention levels, scan paths, visual search strategies and open focus—became the starting point in working with athletes from all sports. What if making the "seeing" part of the brain was just as important as the "thinking" part of the brain when talking to athletes and coaches?

Hence, visual psychology was born.

Clearly, we live, train and play in a visual world. Recent findings confirm that what, when and how we look at the world and the different levels of attention we pay to outside stimuli impact our mindset and overall emotional control. Dr. Les Fehmi, PhD, with his decades of brainwave research and clinical studies in the area of open focus—not the soft focus or fine focus jargon still hurting pitchers and hitters—revealed that stress and anxiety could be reduced by having the brain and eyes pay attention to the space and nothingness around both stationary and moving objects.

It became obvious to me and others that the "zone," which has always been the holy grail in performance, may actually exist within the space and non-judgmental seeing habits of the best athletes and performers.

One day soon there will be hitting model premised on the visual part of the swing in the context of traditional mental skills. College programs are getting close to this paradigm. The US Women's Softball National Team, which is heading into the 2020 Olympics after dominating international play for years, has built their hitting, field and pitching model premised on the eyes and open focus. Professional baseball continues to acknowledge that pitch recognition and chase rates are crucial, but also still believe vision will be improved by eye doctors or playing video games and that timing issues will be solely fixed by swing modifications.

Growth mindset is the key in an industry filled with tradition and data. As we know, data is only as good as its ability to improve performance gains.

Progress is being made in demystifying the visual-mental synergy, and listed below are my favorite visual psychology tidbits that teams have recently added to help in performance gains.

- Sharing with hitters that they can change their initial focus point on the pitcher. Specifically, it doesn’t have to be the bill of the cap or chest or some fixed point but a mindset that allows their eyes to be free and open rather than fixed and stopped. "When I look at nothing, I see everything” is now a famous quote from 12-time All-Star Manny Ramirez that says it all.
- To combat the tunneling challenge of elite pitchers, hitters will learn to sweep and scan the pitcher's delivery in open focus and then avoid over-focusing on the “window” release point that makes funneling the ball once it comes out the “tunnel” almost impossible.
- Premised on Edgar Martinez’s high-speed tennis ball ritual, training hitters to “front -side track" and make the space in front of the moving ball their in-game view finder.
- Introduce eye yoga and speed-reading techniques to improve visual awareness, focus flexibility and faster processing times. Teach open focus while players are strength training or during pre-game routines.
- Eliminate static drills that give the hitters unrealistic “time to collision” that violate the speed of the game realities. There’s a time to feel good in the tunnels, but more time should be spent in the offseason and pre-game routines under visual and time stress. Demystify the space between home plate and the pitcher's rubber and show hitters how timing and space can be improved within this area.
- When coaches are helping hitters build better routines, plans and approaches, add more visual cues and seeing language.
- Meditate and visualize with your eyes open. Attempt to breathe and exhale through your eyes. Talk more about the front of the brain (the eyes) than the back of the brain.
- Share the most popular visual “reboots” and “resets” hitters and pitchers can access during high-stress innings. When prompted, the brain can recalibrate, much like a laptop.
- Be aware of the third-party mental skills tools and strategy overloads that can add more clutter and frustration to the back of the brain. The Law of Dominant Thought is clear—let the brain focus on one thing.
- Teach open focus and different attention levels to pitchers with control issues who believe focusing on the glove or self-talk is the ultimate command fixer.
- Acknowledge that first-step quickness and defensive range can be improved by changing gaze points and attention levels.
- Empower the coaches in the trenches with more “visual ammunition" and convince them that “mental and visual” are one topic.

No one can dispute that seeing the ball or seeing the playing field is a visual task.Therefore, when teaching, start with what matters the most when the game starts. The elite coaches and players will continue to realize that how, what and when we pay attention to the outside world is the key to quieting the chatter and noise coming from the back of the brain.

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