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Keeping Your HEAD in the GAME

By Dr. Randy Borum

As you walk out, the music is blaring. Hundreds, maybe thousands of spectators are screaming. Colored lights are flashing and darting around the arena. Sights, sounds, sensations.....distractions. How do you keep your head in the game when there is so much going on around you?

Focus is an important part of your fight game. You need it stay on plan, to find openings, to anticipate your opponent's action, to get out of bad situations, and to hear your corner. If you get distracted in the middle of a fight, you might wake up asking the fight doctor "Who won?".

The human brain manages lots of sensory input all the time. Right now, your eyes are moving as you read the words on the page; your fingers are feeling the texture of the magazine you are holding; your body is making contact with the surface on which you are sitting; there are sights and sounds around you that are unrelated to this article. Yet you manage to read and comprehend these words. Your brain has figured out how to filter out the stuff that does not matter at this moment, and to attend to what is important.

You can learn to improve your focus, to control distractions and - as a result - probably fight better in competition. The first step is to figure out where you want to focus at different points in the match. At any given time, the direction of your focus may be more internal or external and the scope of your attention may be more narrow or broad according to Robert Nideffer, a leading U.S. sport psychologist.

When your attention is internal, you are focused on thoughts and sensations "on the inside." Broadly, you may be running through strategy in your head, or

more narrowly you may be tuned into your muscle tension or heart rate or thoughts like "My grip is giving out. I'm about to lose this choke."

When your attention is external, you are focused on the sights and sounds in the environment around you. It may be broadly targeted on the noisy, busily-lit arena, or more narrowly focused on your opponent's hip movement as you look for cues to his next move.

Think about the different facets and phases of your fight performance and which dimension of attention fits best. Generally speaking, you probably should save most of your internal focus for backstage and pre-fight preparation and keep a predominantly external focus during the fight itself. Effective concentration requires energy. You will be more efficient when you plan ahead for where and how to focus.

But what about the distractions? The second step is to identify the sources and types of distraction that are most likely to give you trouble. These predictable distractors affect different fighters in different ways. Some fighters may be sidetracked by the cheers or boos from the crowd. Others may be thrown-off by an opponent's antics. But if you can tag them in advance, you can prepare for them. Your overall distraction management strategy will include techniques for changing both what you attend to and how you interpret or react to it. You may not be able to control the spectators' comments, for example, but you can learn to mostly filter them out and to keep them from affecting you emotionally. That is the next step - learning to manage the distractions. Following are a few suggestions:

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Develop a Pre-Fight Routine: It almost always helps to have a plan. Planning out what you are going to do in a given period before the fight can help keep you focused. Your mind is less likely to wander or get snarled in distraction if you are following a specific routine. Plan what you are going to do backstage, in the walkout, during introductions, and as you come out for the fight itself. That may involve listening to certain music, doing relaxation exercises, pummeling, mitt work, rub-downs - whatever works for you. Have a routine, run through it in your head several times, then follow it before the fight.

Use Cue Words to Redirect Your Attention: If you get slightly off-track, using "cue words" can often get your head back in the game. A cue word is a simple one-word instruction that interrupts the distraction and signals your brain back to the present. It should be simple, direct, and consistent with your fight plan. You might use words like "focus" or "present" or "now" or "on plan" - experiment during your training sessions to see what kind of cue words work best for you in different situations.

Cue words are particularly helpful if you catch yourself in a narrow-internal attentional state. Apart from the outside sights and sounds of the fight show, your own thoughts or self-talk can sometimes be a source of distraction. Usually it is because you start thinking about something that has already happened - like a mistake you made - or something that might happen in the future - like "I'm gassing. I'm going to lose." Cue words can help redirect you to the present and get your mental game back on track.

Practice With Distractions: Once you have identified your likely sources of distraction, incorporate them systematically into your training. That's right. Embrace what bothers you most. As you do, you will "habituate" to the distraction so that you are less likely to attend to it and you can practice controlling your negative reactions when they do creep in.

If crowd noises distract you, play a loud recording of crowd noises while you train and spar. Better yet, maybe

add some of your team members to gather around and yell stuff at you at the same time. If lights distract you, then train with flashing, bright, or colored lights. If you feel yourself getting annoyed by them, you can immediately redirect your focus using cue words.

Expect the Unexpected: You can and should plan for the distractions that you think will happen, but sometimes the unexpected event can send us into a spiral if we are not prepared to handle it. Maybe, when you start to bang, you discover your opponent hits harder than you thought or has a better take down than you anticipated. Maybe he unexpectedly rocks you with a strike that seemed to come out of nowhere. That kind of distraction can undermine your confidence and hurt your performance if you give it any air time in your head.

You can prepare for the unexpected, by building unpredictable distractions into your training and sparring. Some unexpected events will occur naturally, of course. Use these as opportunities. But also work with a coach or training partner to use distractions that you do not know about specifically in advance. As with the planned distractions, you can use lights and sounds and reactions from other people. You also can use physical distractions. For example, while you are sparring, have an extra training partner who may be throwing light strikes from the back or side. When you are on the ground, a third training buddy may poke at you with a 16 oz. glove on a pole or a pugil stick. Your task is to maintain your composure, to continue to breathe, and to redirect your focus.

You can train your mind to filter out a lot of unnecessary input, and you can discipline yourself to stay focused in the present. Practice these skills, and do what works for you to keep your head in the fight.

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