



Vision Warm-ups

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The Importance of Vision in Sport

Learning to use your vision is difficult for most kids. It is almost never taught.

Yet it is critical for success in sports.

Think of the great athletes in a sport; Michael Jordan, Barry Bonds, Joe Montana. They all had incredible vision.

Michael had complete court vision. He knew where all of his teammates were, where the defenders were and where the basket was. He was able to keep to do this by having incredible peripheral vision.

Barry Bonds is able to focus very quickly on the ball. He spots the ball up right off the pitcher's hand. He's able to see the seams on the ball as it spins.

Joe Montana was able to know when the rush was closing in on him, run quickly and spot the open receiver. He was then able to focus quickly and deliver a perfect pass.

Not everyone is going to have such amazing vision. But we all can learn to improve and use our vision correctly.

Fight or Flight

When we are in a stress situation, we have either a "flight or fight response".

This is instinctive and we don't have a lot of choice on what we do.

Take for example, Joe Caveman. He goes for a nice walk and spots a lion stalking him. Joe is scared to death and takes off running.

Joe's eyes will focus on the periphery. He will be running as fast as he can to get away. His eyes will be far apart, looking for other lions that might be in the hunt.

When we do this, we aren't able to focus on what's important. For Joe, that was the perfect tree for climbing and escaping.

On the other hand, Joe might have chosen to fight. He might have taken out his trusty spear and stared the lion down. He focuses on the lions throat, ready to kill.

Again, Joe made a bad decision. He didn't see the three other lions that were stalking him too.

We are not able to both focus and see the peripheral events at the same time. What we can do is quickly alternate between them.

What Joe needed to do was to be able to look to the periphery and then refocus and look for an escape or his target.

In Sports

Sports require the same type of vision. And remember, that sports are stressful too. You child might not have any choice but to look like their lost.

There's a lot going on in a kid's mind when they play a sport...

- The coach is yelling encouragement
- Parents are yelling instructions
- The teammates are screaming for the ball
- They need to know where the goal is, where the teammates are, and where the defenders are.
- They are running full speed till they're exhausted.
- They run in circles till they're dizzy and can't focus anyway.

You'd better believe it's stressful.

When I think back to how I played sports, I always looked at the ball. I had no idea I was supposed to look at other things too.

I was so busy watching the ball when I dribbled a basketball, frequently I was under the basket before I could do a lay-up.

Whatever the sport, the ability to go from peripheral to focused vision quickly and willfully is going to affect the success your child has in sports.

The following drills are excellent for teaching the two different types of vision and helping your child learn to switch from one to the other quickly.

I have also included three simple tracking drills. In working with many students there are some that are not able to track objects.

If you watch the eyes of one of these student's they will move erratically and start and stop. Frequently, they give up very quickly.

I believe these tracking exercises are excellent for developing the skill to follow a ball as well as improving reading.

They also are helpful for developing coordination. They do this by forcing the eyes to go across midline and go from left to right

How to use these exercises

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These exercises should be done frequently, but for short periods of time. Two to five minutes at a time is ideal.

They may be done daily or even twice daily.

Do one to two exercises at a time. There is no need to go over every exercise.

They can be done at the beginning of practice or during a time out in a game. They can be done as an additional exercise at home.

During a game or scrimmage use them to help your child refocus and remember to use their vision correctly. One or two repetitions can be enough to help a child get back on track.

These drills can be done by individuals or with a partner. Once learned, they are very simple and quick to perform.

Note

If during the tracking exercises you notice your child's eyes are having difficulty following the ball, you might consider taking them to a vision specialist. This is especially true if they are having difficulties reading.

Tracking Drills

The eyes have to be able to track or follow objects in sport. If the eyes can't follow a ball, catching, hitting or kicking a moving ball becomes very difficult.

Television and computers have limited the practice our eyes need to become skilled at tracking. The following exercises can help train the eyes.

Frisbee

1. Place a tennis ball in a Frisbee.
2. Spin the ball ten times clockwise and ten times counter clockwise.
3. Track the ball using only the eyes.

Pendulum

1. Take a tennis ball and attach it to a string (use a nail to make two holes).
2. Hold the string so the ball is at eye level.
3. Swing the ball slowly so the eyes can track it.
4. Variations: Different heights and head positions...high, low, to the right, to the left.

Figure 8

1. Move finger or object in a horizontal figure 8.
2. Do five in one direction and five in the reverse.
3. This makes the eyes cross over the midline.
4. Can also be done by the student. Have hands together with thumbs extended.

Focusing

Being able to focus quickly and smoothly is another vision skill needed in sport. The eyes have to focus on the ball coming in and then refocus on the target to deliver the ball too.

The distance the eyes focus on can vary greatly. The eyes must change their focusing distance quickly.

Near and Far

1. Hold arm out in front of body.
2. Focus eyes on the finger. Something else may be used (a card, a picture)
3. Bring the hand in slowly till it is about six inches away.
4. Refocus the eyes on the finger.
5. Slowly extend the arm back out and refocus.
6. Repeat five times increasing the arm movement speed.
7. Finish by focusing on a distant object (mountain, clouds, etc)

Peripheral Vision

Peripheral vision is an unknown factor to many coaches. Peripheral vision allows you to see your teammates and opponents all over the field or court. Also, we pick up movement faster using peripheral vision.

Wide and Together

1. Hold both index fingers together, arms distance away from eyes. Focus eyes on the fingers
2. Slowly move the fingers apart. Keep the eyes looking towards the front.
3. The eyes should be able to see the fingers as they move away.
4. Move the fingers apart until they are no longer seen.
5. Move the fingers together slowly. Refocus on them.
6. The fingers may move vertically and diagonally as well.
7. Repeat five times

Another variation is wiggle one finger when the arms are fully extended. The athlete will point to the finger that is moving.

This teaches them to be able to pick up movement from the side.

Movement Drills

These are the most difficult of the drills to do. They take a little more space and time. They are a stepping stone to game and competitive play.

All except the Turning Drill will require adult supervision.

Turning Drill

1. Use a ball as a focus point. Have your child stand five to ten feet away.

2. Have them turn the head to the right. Eyes continue to look at object
3. Return and turn to the left. Keep focus on object
4. Repeat five times
5. Next, have them turn the whole body to the right. The head and eyes remain focused on the ball. Repeat to the other side.
6. Try varying the height and location of the ball.

This drill can be easily expanded upon. Here are some variations to try. Some of them are more appropriate for a team situation.

Here is another variation of the drill.

Look away drill

1. Athlete turns around 180 degrees from the ball.
2. When they are looking away change the location of the ball.
3. Have them turn again and spot the ball.
4. This can be done with a deck of cards where they call out the card's name.

Running and Look Drill

It is difficult to focus on a moving object while running. Think about how hard it is to watch a fly ball, run and catch it.

This drill will help.

1. Athlete runs or jogs around two cones set ten to twenty feet apart.
2. Hold a ball out for them to focus on as they run.
3. Vary the height and location of the ball. Move while they run. Try going forward, back and to the side.

Look and React Drill

This drill can be made as an excellent conditioning drill. Have five preset exercises.

For example:

1. Push-ups
2. Mountain Climbers
3. Jumps
4. Combat Squats
5. Burpee.

Obviously, any exercise can be substituted.

As they run, hold up corresponding fingers for the exercise they are do perform.

Hold the fingers up in different locations. This will require the athlete to pick-up visual changes as well as focus quickly.

By using a visual signal instead of an auditory one, the athlete is required to concentrate not on what they hear, but on what they see.

One final point on this drill. Typically, kids don't communicate well when they play. It is difficult for them to give directions or commands.

A variation which will help this is to have the athletes give an audible for each exercise. They call out the exercise to be performed.

You could have each athlete take turns calling out the correct exercise to do.

Conclusion

For any athlete to have real success on the field, they need to be able to see not only their opponents but the ball as well.

For too long athletes have had to rely on luck or natural talent to have this skill.

By performing a few simple drills your child will quickly learn to use his or her eyes to develop a sense of vision in whatever sport they are playing.

To Fit and Healthy Kids

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