

**“Practice Makes Perfect... The Inner Game of Officiating”**  
**Bill LeMonnier,**  
**Big Ten (Retired) Referee**

Officiating is probably the only job that has the expectation of perfection the first time you walk out onto the field for your very first officiating experience. From there you are expected to get better game after game and season after season.

In an earlier article I wrote, *“Judgment, You Either Have It or You Don’t!”* we discussed the various factors that contribute to improving your skills as an official. Experience and practice are key areas to honing your judgment. Most practice comes in the form of game experience. As repetition of specific plays continues, we come to master things like pass interference, holding, catch/no catch, and fumble/runner down situations.

There are many other situations that we don’t get the opportunity to practice during a game or even a scrimmage because they rarely happen. Things like an illegal bat or kick, momentum inside the 5-yard line, and new impetus rarely occur but when they do, tend to cause us indecisiveness or incorrect judgment. How do we prepare ourselves for these unusual plays when they happen so infrequently? The answer is a technique called “Mental Imagery”.

I first came across the idea of using mental imagery when I was trying to improve my tennis game. In his book entitled “The Inner Game of Tennis”, author and tennis instructor W. Timothy Gallwey talked about the difference between the conscious and unconscious mind affecting your ability to play a peak levels of performance. He devoted a chapter just on the topic of using mental imagery to improve his backhand, serve, and net play. Mental imagery is simply the act of closing your eyes and picturing yourself performing a skill correctly. “Images are better than words, showing better than telling, too much instruction worse than none, and that conscious trying often produces negative results.” This is something we can take from the court or field as a player and apply to improving our officiating skills.

Let’s first expound on the conscious versus unconscious state of mind. Gallwey uses the example of the basketball player who averages ten points a game and three rebounds. One night this same player scores twenty-five points and grabs ten boards.

***Check out W. Timothy Gallwey’s philosophy and tips in his book, “The Inner Game of Tennis”... Random House, NY.***

Lucky? Maybe. In a zone? Most likely! Playing over his head? Not possible, as Gallwey contends that you can't do something even once that you're not capable of doing. If Gallwey is right, then how do we "Get Into the Zone"? How do we reach peak performance on a regular basis? His answer is simply let your subconscious mind take over. The subconscious mind works like a computer with a Pentium processor. When we consciously try to do something it slows us down and inhibits performance. When we practice we should be in a conscious state, when we play or in our case officiate, we need to be in a subconscious state. Hours and hours of practice will create brain traces that are called upon for the subconscious act to occur.

So again, when we get plenty of false starts, holdings, pass interference, and other common situations to the game of football, we are more times than not up to the challenge. When the illegal kick or the bat with impetus occurs we have to consciously think of what it is and what to do. First make a list of plays and situations that cause you the most problems as an official. When you've got ten minutes of leisure time take that first situation and try your hand at mental imagery.

Close your eyes and picture yourself covering the play. The punt return man muffs the punt at his own ten-yard line. A kicking member dives for the ball and bats it forward into the end zone. As you visual this scenario, picture yourself in the right place, looking at the right things. Imagine yourself under total control, with composure and authority calling the foul and then signaling a touchback as the ball becomes dead in the end zone. You nailed the play as a kick that touched a receiver and remained a kick when batted forward and into the end zone. Rule knowledge will determine what the call should be. Mental imagery will allow you to mechanically perform and look like you've handled this play countless times in the past. Now re-image this play at least ten times before going on to your next play. You should always practice doing the play perfect, just like the kicker who obviously never practices missing the game winning field goal.

According to research on human performance, your brain cannot distinguish between physical practice and mental imagery brain traces. While there is no substitute for game experience, we need to find ways to practice the unusual situations that will sooner or later happen in our careers. Mental imagery might just be that something to let you reach your full potential in your officiating career.

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