core matters. The score of the baseball or softball game after 9 innings dictates whether you win or lose. Likewise, in other sports, score, time, place and/or various personal statistics matter. After all, two of the reasons many of us participate in sport are to compete and to win.

While score is important, a focus on score or some other outcome measure during competition (e.g. total weight lifted, time in the half-marathon, place at regionals) often detracts from the task at hand. An over-focus on outcome can lead to all sorts of “mental gymnastics” most tied to things you cannot control. Do thoughts come up like, “If I strike him out, I know the next up is a batter who hit a double in the first inning,” or “I can’t let him get on base, our lead is only 4 – 3 and that would bring the winning run to the plate?” The alternative is to focus on what is controllable; that is, what needs to be done right now to be successful.

What Do You Control?
Let’s start with what you don’t control. As the pitcher, for example, you don’t control the batter, you don’t control your teammates or their response to a ball hit to the infield or outfield, you don’t control the runners on base, you no longer have control over the last pitch that you threw low and outside or the pitch you will throw if the count gets to 3-2, and even more importantly, you don’t have direct control over whether you win or lose the game. So why waste your mental energy and focus on such things?

What you do control is the pitch you are throwing right now and how you throw that pitch right now. One pitch at a time, one strike at a time, all you have control over is right now. Direct your energy to this one pitch, in this one at bat, in this one inning. The concept of “one at a time” applies whether you are the batter or playing in the field. Or, for that matter, this concept applies across sports as focusing on one shot at a time...
in golf, one ball at a time in tennis, or one repetition at a time in weight lifting effectively places mental energy onto the controllable aspects of performance.

Easier Said Than Done
While it makes sense to focus on “one thing at a time” and to place mental energy in the here and now, it can be quite challenging to do so as situations (3 – 0 with bases loaded) and past experiences (“I’ve bobbled the last two ground balls hit to me”) can draw your focus away from the present. Following are a few suggestions to help keep your focus on one thing at a time:

1. Know yourself—Become aware of those situations that are most challenging for you mentally; where you find yourself mentally drawn away from “this ball” or “this pitch.” Be vigilant in these situations and purposefully direct your attention appropriately before you have lapses.

2. Use Cues—Identify cue words or a specific behavior that can help bring your focus to right now. It can be as simple as “all you control is right now—focus on it,” “look for the seams in the ball,” or a slap on the thigh to get your mind where it needs to be.

3. Catch yourself—You’re going to slip; you’re going to mentally drift to a past play or upcoming batter. The key is to not get trapped in such ruminations and instead bring your focus back to this ball. Use your cues to do so effectively.

4. Make a Commitment—Commit to the mental approach of “one at a time.” Recognize that while initially it might be difficult to implement, with practice and persistent, it will become a more natural way for you to approach your performance.

To enhance your performance, you need to focus on your performance—right now. It is wasted mental energy to focus on what did happen or what might happen. Instead, direct your focus to what is happening right now. One at a time—one pitch at a time, one ball at a time, one play at a time.

About the Author
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