

Visualising

In skydiving, as with other sports, we often talk about the importance of visualising and how we should build it into our preparation before a skydive. We are told we should be visualising our body positions, the jump we are about to do, how the skydive is going to go, etc, etc.

But do we really understand why we are doing this? Do we understand what the real benefits are to improve our game plan? If we don't truly understand the power of visualisation are we really maximising our time doing it? Or, are we just paying lip service to it because our peers do it and it seems to work for them?

It certainly worked for Julia Foxwell, who shot to the dizzy heights of World Champion with *Team Airkix* in 2006. Here, Foxy gives an in-depth guide to using the power of the mind to gain a competitive advantage.

What is Visualisation?

Visualising is an ideal method to increase success, as your subconscious mind doesn't differentiate between what you see with your mind's eye and your physical eye, if your visualisation is done in the correct way. Imagery is a way of creating a new reality. In other words, as far as your brain is concerned, you have actually physically practised.

Visualising in the correct way means it's absolutely essential to put emotion into your visualisation. If you don't mix real emotion into your visualising then your subconscious mind **can** distinguish between the two, so you will then dramatically limit the benefits of this amazing tool. In order to add emotion into your visualising you have to fully describe **out loud** everything you feel, smell, see, hear and touch. If you do not do this, you will find it difficult to trigger your emotions and really feel that you are in the place you are describing. This is an important part and I will touch more on this later.

The beauty of visualising is that it can be done at any time of day, and as often as you like. You can continue to practise whether you're ill, injured, skint or bored at work and you are therefore continuing to improve on your skydiving.

Visualisation is so powerful that it has been proven with many athletes in sports around the world that if the athlete has had a layoff through injury, and has spent time visualising, their skills have actually improved!

The Power of Learning

When a coach teaches you something new, such as a way to improve your body position or a different block technique or a change in your exits, do you nod and do what you have just been told? Or, do you truly take the time digesting the information to ensure it remains with you? In other words, if someone wanted you to repeat back, in your own words, what you had been told, would you just shrug your shoulders and say, "Well, I can do it, I just can't explain it", Or would you actually be able to describe it using your own words and understanding?

By describing what you have just been told, you 'find out' what you have digested about the new information. It therefore allows you see what needs further clarification.

This in turn, will ensure your visualisation is most effective as you will be confident that you have the knowledge to visualise with conviction.

Become a Veteran Early

We all know that when we practise something enough, often enough, we will improve. The problem we have in skydiving is that the length of time we can practise our moves is extremely short. It can take years to become good at skydiving, particularly if you are short on funds, or time.

As the subconscious mind does not know the difference between what we are physically and mentally doing, when you have repeatedly visualised something, it actually feels like you have done it many times before. For example, if you properly and repeatedly visualise round 1 of the Nationals, when you are actually in the moment it won't feel as alien to you. This is because your mind and your body have practised that moment so many times, it feels like you have already been there.

When you visualise, its essential you become emotionally involved otherwise your subconscious will be able to distinguish between reality and fiction. To become emotionally involved you have to use all your senses to ensure that it feels as close to the actual experience as possible. Hear the engines cut as your team is getting into position, really feel yourself taking the grip as you walk towards the door, smell the jet fuel in the slipstream as you climb out onto the rail, look into your teammates' eyes and see them smiling back at you, sense your breath within your helmet, take those final deep breaths to slow down your

heart rate, remind yourself to be calm – this is the perfect time to put your mind in the optimum state without any distractions.

If you practise this properly, before you get to a dropzone, it will be a lot easier for you to put yourself back to that mindset as you will be familiar with the feeling of this. It will be something you have practised thousands of times before.

Not only that, but you would have practised everything with perfection. You are visualising exactly how you want it to go, which is flawless; therefore you are not building in any bad habits. A judge once watched a video of my team and made comments on how we looked. After that weekend we spent a month apart from each other and, when we all met again, the same judge was at the dropzone. She watched our skydives of that weekend and congratulated us on how much we had improved, saying, “*You girls have obviously been training hard since I last saw you*”. We all laughed together as all we had done since that meeting was visualised.

Types of Visualising

There are many areas within skydiving to perfect so, for ease of learning, it's recommended you break down each component. You will find your own methods on the types of dives to visualise but this is what I do:-

Firstly, I break down my visualising by going through various areas: blocks only; randoms only; exits; types of jumps (ie, 2 block, 2 random; 3 random 1 block; all random; competition dives) and varying the pace of jumps.

When visualising the blocks, repeat one block at a time (A slots and B slots, mirrored) until you feel you can move through the mechanics smoothly and no longer have a bemused frown on your face!

When going through these parts, keep asking yourself ‘am I calm?’, ‘am I emotionally charged?’ – keep breathing calmly and keep yourself in the ideal state of mind that you know is best for you to perform at your optimum.

How to Visualise

If visualising is new to you then don't expect to crack it straight away. Like with any muscle that hasn't been worked for a while, it needs to be trained regularly, over a period of time before you see the true benefits. Don't give up as, once you have mastered it, you will see your skydiving taking on huge improvements without even necessarily getting back in the air!

When visualising, make sure you are taking the time to absorb **everything**, from climb-out to track-off. Aim to see far more than you have ever seen in freefall. On climb-out, feel the rail in your hands, hear the blast of the slipstream as you're climbing out of the plane, feel your teammate picking up your grip and the added tension on your jumpsuit, look all around and see everyone still and in their positions, smell the olbas oil in your helmet as you take the final breath before the count. Feel the key that is made after the exit, watch your teammates making their move as you are making yours, see the rush of the leg going straight past your head when the block move is happening – in exactly the way you have planned it on the ground. It's vital that this emotion is brought into the visualising particularly as our sport is such a highly charged and mental sport.

One great way to visualise emotion is to describe the sequence in huge detail **out loud**. I recommend you don't do this one in the office, but when you are using all your senses it will dramatically heighten your awareness. Talk through absolutely everything and include all your senses in this. Imagine that you are describing the entire skydive to a blind person.

As well as visualising how the skydive will go, also visualise you achieving your team and individual goals. Your team may have a goal of achieving a certain average or placement at the Nationals. This is also something that's important to be visualising, as seeing yourself in that place is half the way to being in that place.

A number of years ago, I was in an intermediate 4-way team that had come last at the previous Nationals, and this particular year, we were going for gold in the intermediate category. Every morning before we trained we would mentally prepare ourselves for that day which involved some meditation and visualising. Whatever was the first skydive we were going to do that day, we imagined it was round 10 of the Nationals. We visualised exactly how the dive would go by one of us commentating to the rest of the team exactly how the jump was going from climb-out to track-off. We would all see our team performing our best-ever skydive, and tracking off smiling back to each other knowing we had just done the best we could do. We would then get on the ground, find out our score and that we had won the Nationals. We even visualised ourselves on the podium getting our gold medals and, as we did this every morning, we started to see and believe this even more.

Believe it or not, that year we did win the Nationals – in fact, we won the 8-way intermediate Nationals as well. The previous year we came last. I don't know how much of a part the visualising played in us achieving this goal but I'm certain it contributed to our achievement.

When *Airkix* was at the World Cup in Eloy, we came fourth (one point behind the team in third). We were watching the three teams go up to the podium; the Russians, who'd come third were standing on the podium along with the French

team who had placed second. Amanda Kemp took a picture just before the USA team took the first place position on the podium. She then gave us all a copy of the picture and said, “*That empty space is for us at the World Meet next year*”. We all put that picture on our walls, and visualised seeing ourselves on the top of the podium with the national anthem playing. Every time I visualised this, I felt my stomach turning with excitement. It gave me the motivation to do all the things I had committed to when away from the team, like my visualising, watching the ‘best-of’ DVD, keeping myself fit, etc, etc. Sure enough when the World Meet came along, the Russians were there third on the podium, the French were there second on the podium and we had the top slot coming first. Most people don't know how we beat the French and the Russians when they were still training more than us, and were so far ahead of us only nine months before. Part of our secret was our commitment to visualise, and through that visualisation was belief.

Methods of Visualising

Whichever type of jump you are visualising, here are some methods:

Walk through a skydive – in your living room, or an empty office room, keep your eyes open but really work to see and feel your teammates are with you. Keep your head up, take grips in the same way as if they were there, smile at them and communicate with them just as you normally would. Talk out loud what your move is, what you are looking for before the key, etc.

Be the cameraflyer – this will really help you see the entire formation, which in turn will help you understand when formations are complete, help with slot-switchers, and anything unplanned that happens within the skydive. If you can see clearly enough, you will see them happen before they have even begun. This type of visualising isn't quite as easy as we are less practised at seeing the formations from this angle. We spend far more time in formations, than standing back watching them. When doing this initially, start by visualising yourself and then branch out to the entire formation. Also, slow down the pace of the skydive to truly see everyone.

Close your eyes – whether this is when you're waiting for a friend to arrive so you have a few minutes to yourself, or you have ten minutes in a quiet room this is a great way to engage your muscles without actually using them. You will feel the sensory twitches being made when you are going through particular moves. Sitting down with your eyes closed helps improve the pictures in your head because you are not using your body.

Vary the speed – depending on what you're aiming to achieve when you are visualising, change your speed in how you go through your sequence. If you are drilling your learning for blocks then slow your visualising down so you have time to really take in all the technical details of the block. If you are aiming to improve your anticipation, speed up your visualising in order to anticipate the next move quicker. This is also a good way to start to feel what it would be like at a higher average.

Mental strength – if you want to be a champion, you need to act like one. Visualising what type of skydiver you want to be all starts in your head. Do you want to be more confident, particularly at competitions? Or, would you like to be stronger in freefall so the knocks in block moves don't affect you too much? When you're visualising your skydives also visualise the type of athlete you want to be, in order to up your game.

How Often Should I Visualise?

Like with most things, the more you do, the better you will become at it and the more you will get out of it. In the teams I have been in, we have all committed to visualising 10 minutes per day. When I have had a new slot to learn I have increased that to 20 minutes per day. It's a pretty realistic amount of time, in today's busy schedules and means you will keep on top of it. If you can do more, then even better!

In Summary

If you visualise regularly, this will give you greater confidence in your slot. It means you will be able to turn up to the dropzone and, no matter how long it has been since you last saw your teammates, you will feel like you were there only a few days before. Your previous learning will still be fresh in your mind, or in even greater detail. It will mean you can just get on with learning the skydive instead of reminding yourself what your move actually is. It will also mean that when you are in the skydive, in freefall, you can be thinking many moves ahead – just like a game of chess. This greatly reduces brainlocks, as you already know where you are moving to, instead of thinking on the spot. As you have built up so much anticipation because you know your moves well in advance it will help you move to the next point with greater snap and conviction!

Don't forget that this is pretty much the only part of our sport that is free, does not require good weather, funds in your pocket or other people to participate with, so there are no excuses!

Good luck! And if you have any questions, please contact me.

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