

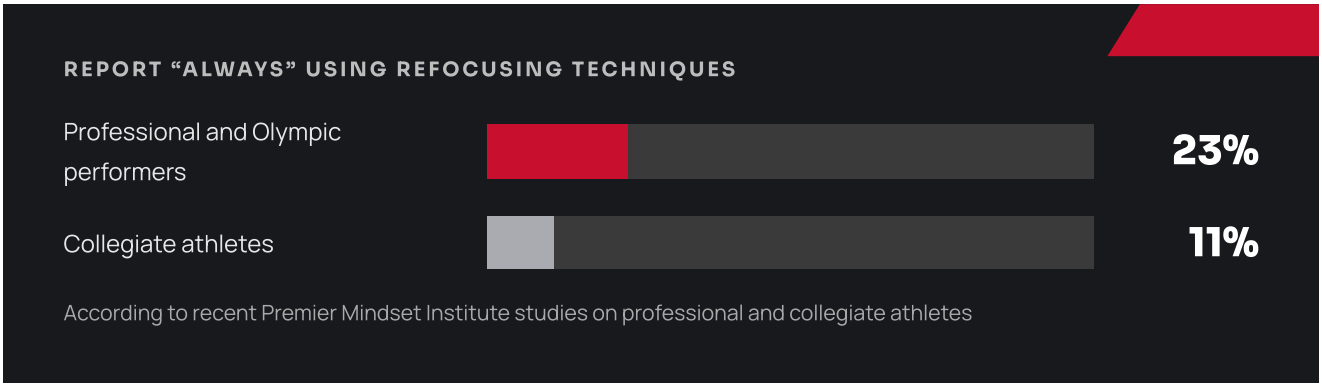
PREMIER MINDSET INSTITUTE

WHITE PAPER

PROS USE REFOCUSING TECHNIQUES ALMOST TWICE AS OFTEN AS COLLEGIATE ATHLETES

Revealing a Clear Performance Differentiator and a Major Training Opportunity

According to recent Premier Mindset Institute studies on professional and collegiate athletes, professional and Olympic performers report "always" using refocusing techniques at roughly double the rate of collegiate athletes (23% vs. 11%). This pattern highlights a meaningful performance differentiator - yet it also exposes a critical training gap.



Across all levels, attentional strategy usage appears far below what modern high-performance environments demand. And with recent research, it is evident that there remains substantial room for even elite athletes to train this core attentional discipline - one that can measurably stabilize execution under pressure.

WHY REFOCUSING MATTERS

High-performance sport is defined by volatility - momentum swings, emotional spikes, external noise, officiating variability, and relentless evaluation. In these environments, distraction is inevitable. Internal distractions such as anxiety, negative self-talk, or overthinking, and external distractions such as crowd noise, officiating, or weather can all hijack an athlete's attention. When focus drifts toward these distractions, such as worrying about a mistake, the score, or others' opinions, performance suffers.

Research consistently shows that attention shapes performance. What we focus on affects our thoughts, emotions, body sensations, behaviors, and ultimately, outcomes. When our attention is consumed by unhelpful stimuli, everything downstream is disrupted.

For example:

- A quasi-experimental study with youth soccer players found that athletes who underwent attentional control training significantly improved focus and performance compared to a control group (Tassi et al., 2023).
- A meta-analysis showed that adopting an **external focus of attention**, meaning focusing on the effect of movement rather than body mechanics, led to better motor learning and performance regardless of age, health condition, and level of skill expertise. (Chua et al., 2021).

In short, distractions are inevitable; however, an athlete's capacity to detect them and deliberately unhook is what separates more consistent performers from inconsistent ones.

WHY ATHLETES GET STUCK

It's believed that distractions capture our attention because they trigger emotional and cognitive reactions. A poor call might evoke anger, a missed shot might bring self-doubt, or crowd noise might shift attention outward. Each reaction redirects focus away from task-relevant cues and toward worry or rumination.

From a neuroscience perspective, distractions overload working memory, which is the mental space athletes rely on for tactical decisions and technical execution. When this space fills with "noise," the brain's ability to coordinate precise, automatic movements declines. Research on attentional focus supports this idea: focusing internally, on body parts or technique, instead of externally, on outcomes or effects, disrupts automatic motor control (Wulf et al., 2001).

This means that when athletes overthink or fixate on distractions, their performance literally becomes less fluid and efficient.

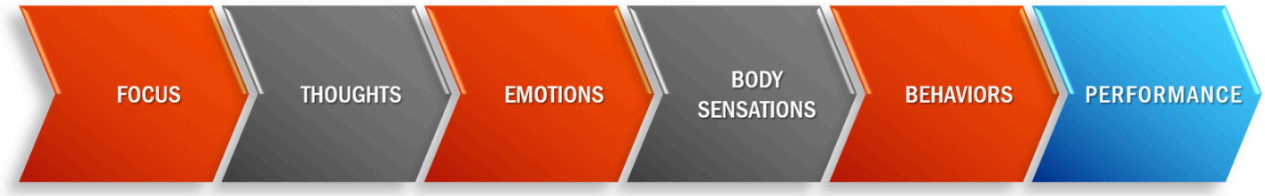
COMBINING DATA AND RESEARCH: THE GAP

Given that only a small percentage of athletes consistently use refocusing techniques, most are entering competition without a structured mental plan for when distractions arise. Physically and tactically, they may be prepared, but mentally, they are vulnerable.

The data highlight a clear developmental opportunity. Athletes can dramatically improve consistency and confidence by building the skill of **refocusing** and deliberately returning attention to what matters in the moment.

HOW TO REFOCUS: EVIDENCE-INFORMED STRATEGIES

1. THE PERFORMANCE MATRIX



Focus is the first step in a chain that shapes performance:
Focus → Thoughts → Emotions → Body Sensations → Behaviors → Performance.

When attention locks onto useful focal points, it aligns the rest of the system for optimal performance. If focus shifts to unhelpful cues such as frustration or fear, it throws the system off balance.

Within this framework, athletes truly control only two things:

1. **Their focus** - what they choose to attend to.
2. **Their routine and behaviors** - what they do in moments of pressure.

Consistency is key. The more an athlete rehearses a routine that centers attention on controllable actions, the easier it becomes to return to that state under stress.

2. USE FOCUS CUES AND ATTENTIONAL ANCHORS

A **cue statement** is a short phrase athletes use to interrupt distractions and re-engage attention. These statements stop negative thought spirals and redirect energy to the task. Examples include:

- Here and now.
- Next play.
- Ball and breath.
- One swing, one target.

Cue statements act as **anchors**, simple and practiced triggers that bring attention back to the present. Athletes can also pair them with physical anchors such as taking a breath, tapping a glove, or scanning the field.

Empirical support for these methods is strong. A study on attentional training techniques (ATT) found that after 12 weeks of ATT practice, junior elite athletes reported lower perceived stress and higher perceived performance (Moen et al., 2016). Another study showed that athletes who practiced **switching attention** between internal and external cues performed better in rowing tasks than those who focused in only one direction (Neumann et al., 2020).

In both cases, attentional flexibility - the ability to notice distraction and choose to refocus - proved critical.

3. EXAMPLE: REFOCUSING IN WOMEN'S SOCCER

Imagine a collegiate soccer player preparing for a corner kick in a high-pressure match.

01

PRE-KICK:

She taps her shin guard, takes a deep breath, and silently says, *"One swing, one target."*

02

SETUP:

She scans the target area, maintaining an external focus on where she wants the ball to go rather than thinking about her foot or the crowd.

03

EXECUTION:

As she runs up, she repeats her cue, allowing it to override distractions like noise or self-doubt.

04

POST-KICK:

Regardless of the outcome, she breathes, taps her shin guard again, and says, *"Next play."*

This short, practiced sequence uses attentional anchors and cue statements to maintain focus and emotional regulation.

Research supports this approach. Focusing on external, task-relevant cues, such as a target zone, enhances movement accuracy and consistency compared to internal focus on mechanics (Wulf et al., 2001). Through repetition, her cue and anchor become automatic, allowing her to perform freely even under pressure.

4. ROUTINE AND CONSISTENCY

Focus skills only work if they are practiced consistently. The Performance Matrix reminds us that focus and behavior are controllable, but they must be trained. Incorporating cue statements, anchors, and brief refocus routines into everyday practice builds our mental muscle.

Coaches can simulate distractions such as crowd noise, errors, or time pressure so athletes can practice using cues in realistic settings. Over time, these strategies become second nature, helping athletes transition quickly from distraction back to execution.

NORMALIZING DISTRACTIONS

One of the most important takeaways is that distractions are normal. Even elite athletes experience lapses in focus. The goal is not to eliminate them but to shorten the time it takes to recover.

By identifying attentional data that serves our goals versus detracts from our goals, athletes can self-monitor and self-correct:

HELPFUL ATTENTIONAL DATA:

Present and action-oriented ("What do I need to do right now?").

UNHELPFUL ATTENTIONAL DATA:

Past or future-oriented ("I cannot miss again" or "What will the coach think?").

The more athletes normalize distraction and practice redirection, the more resilient and adaptable they become under pressure.

EDUCATIONAL TAKEAWAY

The ability to **refocus deliberately** may be one of the most undertrained yet impactful mental skills in sport. Fewer than one in four athletes use it consistently, but it directly affects every other component of performance.

By practicing cue statements, attentional anchors, and consistent routines, athletes strengthen their capacity to direct focus toward what matters and recover faster when distractions occur. Coaches and leaders can integrate these strategies into training, just like physical or technical drills, to develop more mentally adaptable performers.

CLOSING REFLECTION

In high-stakes environments, champions are not defined only by physical ability. They are defined by what their mind does in the critical moments.

The data - that just **11% of collegiate athletes,** and **23% of professional or Olympic athletes,** report using refocusing techniques - tell a clear story. Most athletes still rely on focus to "just happen." The best ones train it.

> **MOST ATHLETES STILL RELY ON FOCUS TO "JUST HAPPEN." THE BEST ONES TRAIN IT.**

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