What is imagery? It is also known as “mental practice” and takes place in the “mind’s eye”. Imagery involves seeing yourself (visual imagery) practicing skills, rehearsing programs, setting and achieving goals, and getting “pumped up” for competition or practice. But imagery is not limited to the sense of sight. Kinesthetic imagery, or imaging how movements feel, is also an important kind of imagery that can help you learn the intricacies of specific skills such as a back pass-through. Information about the force of pushes and the speed and timing of movements is reinforced when you use imagery, because imagery strengthens the connections between your muscles and your brain. While visual and kinesthetic imagery are most commonly used, imagery can encompass all of your senses.

Highly trained athletes also use auditory (hearing), olfactory (smell) and gustatory (taste) senses, or modes of imagery, especially when preparing for competition. Mentally rehearsing (imagining) the sounds of an audience applauding, the smell of dressing rooms or the ice, the feel of the cold air and the taste of sweat are examples that may be used with figure skaters to familiarize them with competitive environments. The goals of these types of imagery are to reduce uncertainty and decrease competitive anxiety and increase confidence.

Many studies in sport psychology have considered the benefits of imagery on performance across a variety of sports and have shown that imagery is a close second to physical practice. In addition to helping physical performance, imagery can aid in improving concentration, building confidence, controlling emotional responses, solving problems and coping with pain and injury. The best aspect of using imagery is that you can practice using this medium any time you like; during car rides to the rink or competition, before bed, while lacing your skates or during breaks, for example. Although ice time and team time may be limited, you will always have your head attached to your body and can rely on your “mind’s eye”. Not sure how or what to image? Consider the following pointers when incorporating imagery into your daily routine.

To begin, focus on using sensory imagery. A good way to start is to review a video of your performance and then imagine yourself skating. You may also want to watch your idol team or skater to see how they do things and then imagine yourself doing the same. In your mind’s eye you can do anything! When using imagery for choreography or enhancing your artistic impression, try thinking of a metaphor associated with the theme of your music. For example, if you are doing circular footwork to Bolero, you might want to imagine being a flowing red cape or a charging bull as you interpret your music. Using such images can help you emphasize certain steps and can also help distract you from the pressures of competition. Focusing on your performance can keep your mind distracted from the stresses of competing.
Metaphorical imagery can also be used to perfect the qualities of movement. Consider imagining a magnet pulling the toe of your blade the next time you have to extend your leg for a while in a spiral or extension.

Enhancing Imagery Skills

Imagery is an ability that can improve with practice. Most skaters have used imagery to some extent but you might be curious about how to maximize your imagery use.

Athletes can use imagery from two different perspectives, or viewpoints: externally - imagining themselves performing a skill as if they were watching a video tape of their performance, and internally - seeing their performance as if they were looking through their own eyes, capturing peripheral movement in space. 

External imagery is beneficial for teaching strategies and skills. It enables the skaters to rehearse their role in a formation or make plans in case of a fall or missed step. Internal imagery enhances the feeling of movements and focuses on peripheral vision. Internal imagery can help skaters become oriented to markers around the rink that can be used to orient oneself in a new arena or to know how hard to push when increasing, maintaining or decreasing skating distances from teammates during moves.

There is, however, much more to imagery than just perspective. In order for imagery to have beneficial effects, the content of the imagery must accurately reflect the intended outcome. Incorporating key properties of imagery during imaging sessions can help to improve imagery ability. These properties include vividness, controllability, and exactness of reference. When practicing your imagery remember the following:

1) Vividness: A clear detailed image helps you learn skills more quickly. Developing high levels of vividness is an essential step in developing skills.

Example: Imagine seeing markers on the ice and along the boards or imagine the whites of your teammate’s eyes as you make eye contact before a pass-through.

2) Controllability: Learning how to manipulate images so they correspond to objectives enables recovery from mistakes.

Example of Controlling Performance: Try imagining yourself doing a wheel element when your arms begin to slip from your hold on your teammate. With the use of a metaphorical image, (a splotch of glue), and internal imagery, feel the strength needed to maintain the hold of your teammate’s arm. You are in complete control of the outcome when imaging.

Example of Controlling Emotions: Consider the last time you made a mistake during a run through of your program. You might have let go of your teammate, fallen or missed a jump. Imagine the tension felt as your teammates noticed your error. You tense up, become angry with yourself and lose concentration and confidence. Now try recreating that situation especially focusing on the associated negative feelings. Next, imagine dealing with the emotions in a positive way such as imagining the anger, tension or anxiety lift away from your body or flush away down the drain as you regain your confidence.

3) Exactness of reference: The exact replication of successful performances is required in order to make them automatic, so that you can focus on presentation rather than technique. Research has shown that practicing errors or wrong images produces a tendency to perform those errors because of the mind-body connections operating during imagery. Exactness of reference involves imagining the details of correct technique needed for a skating skill.

Example: Focus on imagining the difference between the force (kinesthetics) associated with pushing for a double count sashay versus a single count sashay. Exactness of reference can apply to the speed of your body movements, and it can also apply to the speed of your actual imagery. For example, imagining footwork sequences in slow motion enables you to attend to the order of the steps and to the correct body positions involved. Adding a little auditory imagery while imagining in real time can help you memorize important tempo changes or beats where you strike a pose. In contrast, fast motion rote imagery (imagining the same steps over and over) can help solidify your memory of step sequences.

When trying to use imagery in conjunction with practice, skaters may not know what to imagine. Keeping the following categories of image content in mind might help make your imagery sessions most effective.

Cognitive imagery is used to rehearse either general strategies of performance (e.g., formations, transitions, reaction to a fall) or specific skills (i.e. jumps, twizzles, spirals).

Motivational imagery is used when setting goals (e.g., pointing toes every time you extend your leg in the next three run-throughs), mastering a technique (e.g., keeping...
your skating shoulder up during a loop jump), or anticipating the feelings of anxiety or excitement associated with competition. When skaters use imagery to familiarize themselves with upcoming events or activities they are better able to handle these tasks and pressures in real life situations.

Key points for incorporating Imagery

Although it is beneficial to individualize imagery programs, introducing imagery in a group format might be the most effective way for your team to begin. This can be achieved by seeking the expertise of a sport psychologist. Once the basic imagery characteristics have been introduced, skaters can develop their own imagery scripts. Coaches can help skaters write scripts to read and rehearse in their “mind’s eye”. You can even tape record your voice reading the script and then listen to it later during your imagery practice. While skaters can formally practice imagery during a session devoted specifically to imagery, it is also important to use imagery in training periods between competitive events, immediately prior to and during a competitive event, and when rehabilitating an injury. Other strategies to consider include highlighting videotapes of successful performances to enhance confidence and using imagery logs to record helpful images and skill-specific metaphors.

It is important to note that physical practice is superior to imagery practice; imagery should be a supplement to physical practice, never a replacement. There are many appropriate times to use imagery including before, during and after practice, during breaks in daily activity and at night just before bed. A coach may also want to build in time for imagery during a practice so that the relationship between kinesthetic imagery of skills and the mechanical performance of skills is strengthened. Using imagery after a practice session can help reaffirm lessons.

There is an art and a science to using imagery, but for it to be effective, always remember the KISS principle: Keep It Simple and Smart. By believing in the power of imagery and applying simple concepts and strategies, skaters can systematically rehearse their skills and mental toughness needed to perform their best throughout their competitive season. Seeing IS believing! 🎨