Techniques to Improve Concentration

Learning requires 3 distinct stages
1. Education – to learn what the technique is and its goals.
2. Learning the practice – to learn how to practice the technique in your life and training.
3. Executing the practice – repetition of the technique until you embody what it intends to achieve.

The goal of mental training
Poor concentration is one common reason for a scattered mind-set. If your mind isn’t as strong and alert as it could be, you won’t be able to focus clearly for extended periods of time. Mental exercises can help because they strengthen your ability to concentrate, and will improve your focus over time. Below are exercises that can help you create a strong, clear focus:

1) Strengthen concentration. Twice a day, practice holding a specific object in mind steadily for 5 to 10 minutes. The item should have some detail that you can imagine, but it should also be simple to “see” it in your mind. Some good examples: an apple, a pencil, the face of your child or pet, your house as it looks from the outside, and so on. Choose something you won’t have trouble picturing, but something that requires you to focus in order to see it clearly. Call up a strong mental image of it, and then try to keep your focus on the object for a full 5 or 10 minutes without losing your focus. Keep pulling your attention back to the object when the mind starts to scatter or other thoughts enter. This exercise trains the mind to distinguish relevant from non-relevant thoughts without losing your focus on your mental object.

-- Further exercises: practice focusing in high stimuli environments. Then focus on a task in an environment with different stimuli that seek to grab your attention. This can be done in many day to day situations.

-- The following website uses video-based exercises that you can do at the computer. (This is not an endorsement, only an example of what exercises can be found and used on the internet.)
http://www.lumosity.com/

-- Training to change the way we respond to stress. One example is Stress inoculation training, which specifically focuses on reducing performance anxiety

2) Empty your mind. Set aside 5 or 10 minutes to focus on quieting your thoughts. You can detach and simply let them pass by. You become an observer of sorts, watching your thoughts flow by. You’re aware that you’re having thoughts, but you don’t latch on to them and start actively “thinking” about them. You simply sit in a space of peace and being while your thoughts flow calmly past. This will improve your attention to the present moment.
-- Concentration cds: there are meditation cds and music that changes the brainwaves to relax and clear the mind. Buddhist chanting, for example, is known to alter the brainwaves and make it easier to clear the mind.

-- Make a check list of mental reminders. When you enter an arena with a lot of stimuli, it helps to go through a mental checklist, which includes simply breathing deeply. This simple act refocuses the mind on the task at hand and clears out the non-relevant stimuli.

3) **Visualize for practice.** There are studies that show that the mental preparation of athletes is just as important as the physical training, even though it is often neglected. Gaining the mental habits takes repetition just like physical habits. Try visualizing yourself staying balanced, calm and focused throughout the course of your day, easily handling any surprises and interruptions, and feeling happy and proud of yourself at the end of the day. Visualize yourself succeeding. The trick is to go through it completely in your own mind, seeing and feeling what you would see and feel while it’s really happening. The more you do this the more proficient you will become at it and the more you’ll start seeing results in your physical activities.

-- I heard that FIFA provides CDs to teach visualization training. I found some with the following goals:

> “Imagery involving perfect execution, as opposed to imagining errors or sloppy performances, is associated with short-term performance improvements, such as those achieved in one day or in the period before contests practice control in your mental imagery sessions by acknowledging that negative or faulty technique images will often be visualized during a training session, and recognize the importance to regain control, “rewind the tape”, and visualize the moment again with correct form.”

4) **Train to your extremes.** If athletes train to a level that the game (or the fitness test) can be accomplished comfortably, we are not prepared for those rare moments when you have to exert a ton of energy in a small amount of time. In those moments, we mentally excuse ourselves for any mistakes due to lack of focus. Instead, if we train to make decisions at our moment of exhaustion, we can improve our accuracy even in these physically demanding moments.

-- Ways to improve this: One example from young olympians who were sent to train with navy seals:

> "One of the purposes of this training was to ingrain into the mind so of these ladies that if you are tired, you can still go on and do more. If things get a little tough, keep going. If the fuel gauge is about to go off, you now know how far you can go. The problem in athletics and the Navy SEALs is that the fuel light is going off all the time. You must know how far you can go once that happens.”
-- Change in attitude: 
*Do not celebrate!* Expect to succeed. Slap hands and move on.

-- Discipline in physical training. To be aware that our discipline to deal with stress and get through physical limitations have been shaped by: 1. *Early life exposure to stressors.* 2. *Passive toughening:* periodic exposure makes people less sensitive and more tolerant of stress. 3. *Active toughening.* Physical fitness gained through aerobic conditioning is thought to be an important means of self-toughening. You have control over yourself. 4. *Aging.* This has the opposite effects to the other three, but if you are aware of this and tailor your mental training as needed, some of the effects can be offset.

-- Use Preseason games to identify areas where you are uncomfortable. Use these games “as developmental research tools to help identify state anxiety issues, and build strategies to improve relaxation, confidence, and attentional focus.” Work to stop negative thoughts about mistakes and build the correct action in your mind and build an “event-specific attentional focus.” Part of event-specific attentional focus is to make this mental imagery at the moments when the most stimuli, or the highest level of fatigue. This will train the body and mind to be calm and attentive in stressful moments.

* note: when injured, have an alternate training equally rigorous where you can still accomplish the mental training goals.

-- The Belief. “Athletes who exhibit internal control tend to believe their behaviors influence outcomes. Those who exhibit external control tend to attribute their outcomes to outside forces such as fate, chance, and other people (Cox, 1998).”

**Summary**

The sections above are the common threads that run through the literature I found on mental training for athletes. Each section proposes some exercises we can include into our training during the season, including some changes to how we train physically as well. Many studies of top athletes show how much dedication they put into mental in addition to physical training. Unfortunately, the mental aspect is not systematically coached with the same interest as physical or tactical training. This is just a brief summary of some of the techniques that officials and athletes can use to improve their concentration for the duration of the game and further reduce errors in stressful situations.