

# SAIL MENTAL

The Competitive Sailor's  
Definitive Guide To Mental Practice

ROAD TO  
GOLD

Use Your Brain To Become A Better Sailor (EVEN when you're not on the water!)



Take a few seconds to try this little experiment.

Imagine picking up a lemon... cutting it in half and hearing the swish of the knife... smelling the sharp citrus smell... and biting into it.

...

Is your mouth watering?

That's because your mind can't tell the difference between your imagination and reality. You've just tricked it into thinking you're *actually* sucking on a lemon!

This is how mental practice works. Create an extra vivid, lifelike experience inside your head, and your body can't distinguish it from the real thing.

If you repeatedly imagine doing a task a thousand times, you'll condition your neural pathways just like you do in your physical practice. It's like carving a groove into your nervous system.

When you come to perform the action in real life, it will feel like you've done it a thousand times before... because in a way, you have!

“Not only does mental rehearsal increase the chances of a good performance, but ability at the practised skills will actually improve ... Winning, remember, starts in the mind. By establishing greater perfection in your mind, you establish a model of the perfect race, which will in time come more nearly to be played out on the water.”

**Eric Twiname, author of Sail, Race and Win**

“It is widely accepted among top sailors that the rather unique aspects of the sport place a premium on having well refined and well rehearsed mental skills. Sailing is widely regarded as being amongst the most highly complex and technical sports, certainly right up there alongside the likes of Formula 1. It requires a high degree of physical and mental agility with success often being dependent upon the sailor's ability to rapidly analyse a multitude of complicated and often conflicting data. The raw components of sailing – the wind and the waves – are not controllable and are different every time you go afloat. In addition, the 'playing surface' is very large and often very unpredictable making it impossible to cover all the bases; you never quite know what the other competitors are going to do or what might happen next. Combine this with the fact that going to a major regatta may require the sailor to be fully focused for anything up to ten days, and it becomes easy to see the importance of being mentally strong.”

**Ian Brown, The Psychology of Sailing for Dinghies and Keelboats**

“Research has shown very clearly that mental rehearsal is the next best thing to physical practice - what's more it's cheap, and you can do it anywhere!”

**Alan Beggs, John Derbyshire, John Whitmore, Mental & Physical Fitness for Sailing**

## Backed By Science

Extensive research has demonstrated the cognitive link between mental practice and physical performance.

In [one study](#), golfers who combined physical training with mental rehearsal performed better than golfers who only did physical practice, despite the fact that both groups spent the same total time practising.

[Multiple studies](#) have shown that physical strength can be improved *solely through mental workouts*. What's more, picturing lifting a heavy object [results in more muscle response](#) than when imagining lifting a lighter object.

Other studies provide examples of [surgeons](#), [musicians](#), [soldiers](#), [stroke patients](#), [rock climbers](#), [basketball players](#) and [slalom skiers](#) all successfully improving their performance through the use of mental rehearsal.

This won't come as a surprise to Olympians and World Champions. Many of the greatest athletes of all time have described how they used mental imagery to take them to the top of their game.

***Some of the greatest athletes of all time use mental imagery as part of their training: Tiger Woods, Phelps, Muhammad Ali, Andy Murray, Jonny Wilkinson, Michael Jordan, Ronaldinho, Arnold Schwarzenegger,***



## Phelps: Ready For Anything

Having already won 7 gold medals at Beijing in 2008, Michael Phelps was on the doorstep of making Olympic history. It looked like he was about to win 8 gold medals in a single Olympics, a feat nobody had achieved before.

All that stood in his way was the 200m Fly. Diving in at the start of the race, disaster struck. His goggles started to leak. By the 150 mark, his goggles were completely full of water and he was swimming blind.

But instead of panicking, he stayed calm and composed and focused his concentration on his stroke count. He knew exactly how many strokes would get him across the pool, as quickly and efficiently as possible.

And sure enough, he got that 8th gold medal!

There's a reason Phelps is the most decorated Olympian of all time. Yes, he's 1.93m tall. He's got great LOA (waterline length!). That definitely helps.

But he's also prepared for anything and everything. Mental rehearsal was a huge part of his training regimen.

He would visualise every minute detail: the starts, the strokes, the walls, the turns, the ends, and the strategies. And he would 'program' solutions for if his goggles filled with water or his swim cap came off.

Are you prepared for whatever a race throws at you? Of course, you might argue that every 50m pool that Phelps ever swam in was the same length. As a sailor, no two race courses are the same, at least the conditions are forever changing. So how do you prepare for that?

Read on...

## Xu: From Disaster To Opportunity

Within sailing, Xu Lijia's story illustrates the impact that mental training can have on performance. Six months before the Laser Radial sailor was due to compete at the London 2012 Olympics, she fell off her bike during a training session, breaking a bone in her hand. It meant she couldn't get in the boat for three months.

Nevertheless, that summer, she became the first Chinese dinghy sailor to win an Olympic gold. What could have been a major setback she turned into an opportunity.

Describing her process:

*"After reading some sports psychology books, I made a list of the things that I wanted to practise, just as if I was training on the water. The difference was in training my mind, instead of actually physically on the boat. So the boat handling, how I would like to tack and with how much rolling of the boat, how I would like to sail upwind with more aggressive body movements. Every single detail, I tried to meditate over and over again, and then it became so deeply ingrained into my subconscious, I thought I'd never been away from sailing for a single day. I had more time indoors because I couldn't go out during my recovery for my broken hand, but I put all that extra time away from sailing into rehearsal."*

Despite being forced to stay ashore for months, when she finally got back in the boat she was a better sailor than before.



## Take control of your mind

Even at the best of times, many of us can only get out once or twice a week. Competition is tough. If you're to be successful out there, you'll need to attain peak physical and mental condition... And getting good at mental rehearsal will put you ahead of 95% of sailors.

Researchers have actually found that combining physical and mental practice can halve the time it takes to reach the same skill level as someone who solely uses physical practice. Think about that. If you want to master a skill, properly visualising your practice can cut your number of actual practice hours in half! That's why this is a skill worth learning now, as it'll serve you the rest of your life.

Whether you mean to or not, you're already running images through your head all day, every day. After races, we'll often replay a move we used to gain a place, or a mistake that set us back. It's important to remember that whatever you keep repeating in your mind gets reinforced.

So going over a mistake and visualising what you *should* have done – what action you will take instead next time – can be extremely beneficial... Meanwhile, simply repeating the mistake over and over, as it happened, will probably lead to it happening again.

That's what the rest of the book is all about: making sure your imagery works *for* you and not *against* you.

And if it seems daunting, don't worry – learning any new skill does. Until you break it down to bite-size pieces that even a child could swallow.

## Top athletes on mental practice

- “I wasn’t the kind of diver who did a dive because I wanted to be a daredevil. I had to be physically and mentally prepared to do it. I had to be able to see it in my head.”  
**Greg Louganis**, considered the greatest diver in history
- “It’s like a painting. A painter doesn’t know the overall finished painting. They have an idea. If they can see it, form it and make it happen, that imagery work is what makes it happen. It’s the same thing with diving. If you can see yourself hitting a dive, the chances of you hitting a dive increase greatly.”  
**Troy Dumais**, four-time Olympic diver
- “I used visualisation to think about the perfect technique. If I could get that perfect image in my head, it helped me channel my physical performance.”  
**Jessica Ennis-Hill**, Olympic gold medallist and three-time heptathlon world champion
- “When I woke up that day in London, my body knew: ‘It’s time. This is it.’ I’d been there thousands and thousands of times in my mind. On that day, it just felt right, it felt like it was meant to be.”  
**Kayla Harrison**, two-time Olympic gold judoka and world champion
- “We figured it [imagery] was best to concentrate on these tiny moments of success and build them into mental triggers... It’s more like his habits had taken over. The actual race was just another step in a pattern that started earlier that day and was nothing but victories. Winning became a natural extension.”  
**Bob Bowman**, coach of record-breaking swimmer Michael Phelps
- “When I get there, I’ve already pictured what’s going to happen a million times so I don’t actually have to think about it.”  
**Missy Franklin**, five-time Olympic gold swimmer
- “Points happen literally in split seconds, and tides can change and turn very, very quickly. So part of visualisation is preparing yourself for every situation, so when it shows itself, you’re ready for it.”  
**Mariel Zagunis**, two-time Olympic gold fencer



- “We do imagery work and talk about having that innovative mindset of being special. We talk about being in the moment and increasing chaos throughout practice, so when I go into the game, everything is relaxed.”  
**Russell Wilson**, elite NFL quarterback
- “You are creating the sights and sounds and smells, the atmosphere, the sensation, and the nerves, right down to the early morning wake-up call and that feeling in your stomach. It helps your body to get used to performing under pressure.”  
**Jonny Wilkinson**, former England rugby international fly-half
- “I lie in bed the night before the game and visualise myself scoring goals or doing well. You're trying to put yourself in that moment and trying to prepare yourself, to have a 'memory' before the game. I don't know if you'd call it visualising or dreaming, but I've always done it, my whole life”  
**Wayne Rooney**, Manchester United striker
- “Visualization, for me, doesn't take in all the senses. You have to smell it. You have to hear it. You have to feel it, everything.”  
**Emily Cook**, veteran American freestyle skier and three-time Olympian
- “When I train, one of the things I concentrate on is creating a mental picture of how best to deliver the ball to a teammate, preferably leaving him alone in front of the rival goalkeeper. So what I do, always before a game, always, every night and every day, is try and think up things, imagine plays, which no one else will have thought of, and to do so always bearing in mind the particular strength of each team-mate to whom I am passing the ball ... That is my job. That is what I do. I imagine the game.”  
**Ronaldinho**,
- “I think that mental rehearsal is every bit as important as physical rehearsal.”  
**Phil Mickelson**, legendary golfer, winner of 44 PGA Tour events
- “I feel that hitting specific shots -- playing the ball to a certain place in a certain way -- is 50% mental picture, 40% setup, and 10% swing.”  
**Jack Nicklaus**, another legendary golfer
- “It was effortless; the movies I saw in my head seemed to have their own projector, and whenever I closed my eyes it would run.”  
**Bill Russell**, basketball player who won more NBA Championships than any other player in history
- “I always visualize the run before I do it. By the time I get to the start gate, I've run that race 100 times already in my head, picturing how I'll take the turns.”  
**Lindsey Vonn**, one of the most successful female skiers in history

- “It’s the repetition of affirmations that leads to belief. And once that belief becomes a deep conviction, things begin to happen.”  
**Muhammad Ali**, one of the greatest boxers of all time
- “While you’re doing an exercise, if you concentrate and visualize your muscles growing while commanding and demanding them to grow, the results will come much faster. The mental picture you form of what you want to be and what you want to accomplish can greatly aid your progress toward attaining those goals. I focused all of my mental concentration on accomplishing my goal whenever I was at the gym. Every repetition of every set was done with intense concentration. I visualized each exercise, completed each repetition and set as bringing me closer to my goal.”  
**Arnold Schwarzenegger**, one of the greatest bodybuilders of all time (amongst other things)

And you thought these legends won through sheer talent! 🤔

Well, maybe they did. But it was talent that they developed through rigorous mental rehearsal.

## THE MANY USES OF MENTAL PRACTICE IN SAILING

Even a world-class sailor can end up sailing like a beginner if he succumbs to anxiety, over-consciously making rookie mistakes. Mental practice can help you get into the required mental state for top performance.

“I believe arousal control is an essential part of any sailor’s mental preparation. There is a huge difference between racing in strong winds and racing in light winds. When you are preparing for a strong-wind race it is more physical and things are happening quickly, so hype yourself up before you launch and make sure you are feeling on edge and alert. (A rugby or football player would do something similar.). In light winds, however, you need to make gentle, precise movements and you have time to make decisions on the tactics, so you need to calm yourself before you launch and focus (like a chess or snooker player).”

**Joe Glanfield**, two-time silver Olympic medallist

Some of the many other uses include:

- Mastering skills more quickly and effectively
- Making goals easier to work towards
- Practising specific skills (tacking, gybing, starting, hiking, etc.)
- Relaxation (and handling competition anxiety)
- Making stress work for you, not against you
- Building confidence for any unfamiliar scenarios (such as sailing at the front of the fleet, at a new venue, or in a big fleet, etc.)
- Running post-race analyses (mistakes, what to do next time, etc.)
- Building healthy on-boat relationships
- Getting in the right mental space before a race (becoming more focused, making stress work for you not against you)
- Pretty much any aspect of sailing/racing/psychology you can think of!



**Xabi Fernandez and Iker Martinez having an anxious moment at the Olympics**

# BEFORE AND AFTER

<b>Without Mental Training</b>	<b>Having Done Mental Training</b>
<p>You arrive at the event, and nerves lead you to think, “What am I doing here? I should be at home with my peers and family.” You wonder what place you’ll end up finishing and picture/fear the worst. You set goals like top 10, thinking “I have to finish top 10.” While racing, your mind keeps going to the numbers, who’s in what place, rather than noticing puffs and big shifts. You’re anxious and alternate between being oblivious that you’re anxious and then wanting to fight the anxiety. Out of tune with yourself, anxiety transforms into anger as you tell your partner to “F— off!” You feel yourself giving up and feel energy slip away and you regret the fact that it was hard to sleep last night. You desperately want this day to be over.</p>	<p>You arrive at the event, noticing your nerves and embracing them. You have clarity about why you are here; you thrive on pushing yourself. Thoughts of self-doubt come and go, without sticking- your brain is mostly quiet or focused on the task at hand. You know you’ve put in the effort such that you can picture finishing in the top 10, but your dominant focus is effortlessly (out of habit) shifting from noticing your internal state, to strategy, boat speed, boat handling, and tactics. You’ve got concrete goals to focus on, technique or other elements that are within your control. You notice anxiety ebbing and flowing, but feel equipped to accept and modulate it. You catch errors that you and your partner make along the way and find constructive ways to talk about them, during moments when it makes sense. You feel rested, energized, and ready. You find yourself excited to continue seeing how things unfold moment to moment.</p>

## MENTAL PRACTICE: NEED TO KNOW

Make sure you're doing it right by following the guidelines below...

### PROCESSES NOT OUTCOMES

What's the difference between proper mental practice and day-dreaming? Dr Stuart Walker sums it up:

"The desire to sail well often results in winning; The desire to win rarely results in sailing well."

He's reminding us to shift our emphasis away from results and onto performance. Picturing medals and glory is essentially just wishful thinking. Effective visualisation is about mentally rehearsing the **specific skills** that will enable you to win. Instead of focusing on the outcome, you're thinking about the processes that will lead to that outcome.

[This video explains in 60 seconds why the concept is so important.](#)

## QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Getting good at mental practice requires, well, *practice*. When you first begin, it's easy to bite off more than you can chew. You overload your brain, get discouraged and never try it again.

So make sure you ease into it. Start small and build up from there. You can gently flex your mental rehearsal muscles by picking a process that is already second-nature to you, like a regular warm-up routine. See how vivid you can make the images, just for a couple of minutes at a time.

As you get better, you can gradually expand your focus to incorporate something more challenging. You can make the sessions longer. But only advance once you're comfortable with the basics.

## DON'T OVERSTRETCH

Surgeons have been shown to improve their skills through mental rehearsal. That doesn't mean we can all improve our operating skills through mental practice. Unlike surgeons, we don't have any clue of the ins-and-outs of surgery (or maybe even the broad strokes). No matter how vividly you picture the scalpel in your steady hand... how good your intentions are... you're gonna make a mess of it.

Before you can create accurate and vivid imagery, you need to at least be familiar with the task you are practising. A foundation of physical ability and know-how is required. If you've never performed a technique before, it will be tricky to picture. And if your pictures are hazy, they probably won't have much impact on your real world results.

## KEEP IT REAL

Along the same lines, you've got to make sure your rehearsal is realistic. As handy as it would be to perform Jedi flips around the boat, no amount of mental practice is going to help you attain that. We're still working within the laws of physics here unfortunately. Keep your mental attention on the things that you can control, like for instance how you're going to get your timings right.

## BE THE STAR (NOT THE AUDIENCE)

There are two ways you can run through your mental rehearsal:

1. first-person, where you're directly experiencing your performance, and
2. third-person, where you see yourself as if on TV

Research indicates that rehearsing in first-person perspective provides better results. As it's closer to your experience of the real-life scenario, and therefore better tricks your mind into registering it as real practice.

There *are* some uses for the external perspective, such as reviewing past performances, but most of your time should be spent fully immersing yourself in the process – as if it's actually happening to you personally.



## ENGAGE ALL 5 SENSES

“Sounds, smells, colours, tastes and textures will all help make the experience become more believable.”

**Jon Emmett**, Be Your Own Sailing Coach

Mental imagery works because it tricks your brain into thinking you're doing actual practice. You're creating such a lifelike experience that your body believes that it could be real. The more vivid your imagery, the more effective it will be. Make the experience as crisp, detailed and real as you can – by involving all five of your senses.

## KNOW THE TERRITORY

See yourself in the exact venue you'll be competing. Setting your mental rehearsal in the right environment makes your brain think it's been there many times before, which goes a long way in building confidence and handling nerves for when the big day arrives. If you've never sailed there before, find pictures or videos online (or better yet, go to the venue beforehand).

## PREPARE FOR ALL SCENARIOS

Picturing success can help in building confidence, but you need to know how to react when things go poorly too. In sailing, we're at the mercy of unpredictable external factors, like the weather conditions. You can't control these factors. But you *can* control your response to them.

Use your mental training time to prepare yourself for anything that comes your way. When you've already solved a problem in your mind a thousand times before, you'll be equipped to handle it when, inevitably, it occurs in real life.

Our fellow sailors (🤪) the Navy SEALs have a mantra:

**Under pressure, you don't rise to the occasion, you sink to the level of your training.**

That's what mental practice is all about – going over the correct procedures in your mind until you can't get them wrong.

## PARALYSIS BY ANALYSIS

It's definitely possible to overthink this! Plan your mental rehearsal carefully, schedule a time each day to run through it, and then forget about it.

# A 100% Guaranteed Method For Relaxation

Relaxation is key to effective mental practice. It frees your mind from distractions, making you more receptive to the experience. Along with the added health benefits, consciously relaxing improves your ability to stay calm under pressure.

Follow these simple steps and I guarantee calm and composure (or your money back) ...

- 1.** Find a quiet place with a comfortable chair, preferably a room free from interruptions.
- 2.** Close your eyes and focus only on your breathing for a minute.
- 3.** Breathe deeply and steadily through your nose, into your stomach, counting up to 4.
- 4.** Breathe slowly and deliberately out through your mouth, counting down from 4.
- 5.** Repeat this for 20 full breaths.
- 6.** Now let your body relax. Some people like to imagine themselves feeling heavy.
- 7.** Starting from the top of your head, slowly move down your whole body, scanning for any tension and letting it just melt away. Move down to your facial muscles, your jaw, neck, shoulders, arms, wrists and back.
- 8.** Take your time, as you continue down to your hips, arse, thighs, knees, calves, feet and even toes.
- 9.** Next, imagine yourself walking down a beautiful staircase of 10 steps, arriving at each step on the end of an exhale of breath. Count yourself down from 10 to 1.
- 10.** As you step off the final stair, picture yourself somewhere peaceful and relaxing, such as a beach or meadow. Imagine the sounds, smells and textures, appreciating all the sensations. You can spend as long as you like here (but try not to fall asleep).
- 11.** When you're ready, count up from 1 to 10, exhaling on each count. Open your eyes on 8 and come back to full awareness on 10. Take note of how good you feel.



Next up: the mental practice technique itself (finally)

# Powerful Mental Imagery in 10 Easy Steps

## 1) Simply relax

Before anything, find a comfortable place free from distractions, and go through the relaxation method above.

## 2) Set a purpose

When you're feeling calm and ready, turn your attention to your upcoming performance or competition. Start with a clear intention or goal. What do you want to work on this session? Is it your windward mark roundings, or maybe gybing in strong winds? It's important you know this before you get into it, or you could end up aimlessly daydreaming...

### 3) Break it down

Imagine what your performance will look like and break it up into segments. For example, in the case of windward marks first you're going to look upwind and see where the next gust is coming from, then you're going to set up the spinnaker and the pole for either a bear-away or gybe-set hoist, then picture yourself releasing the controls and in which order you do that. Separate out each of the steps and picture them as clearly as possible.

### 4) Don't forget the lead-up

It may be tempting to jump right into the action, but it's also important to become familiar with the moments leading up to your performance. Picture yourself in the exact location you'll be performing (find pictures/videos online if you haven't been there before). Run through your pre-game/warm-up routine, psyching yourself up. Do this every time you mentally rehearse, and when it comes to race day, it'll feel like you're doing it for the thousandth time (because in a very real way, you are).

## 5) Engage ALL of your senses

As you begin running through your performance, one by one, introduce each of your senses. Make the moment real. Imagine in vivid details sound, movement, feelings and visualisation, whatever you want to practise. Experience yourself as the star of your own movie.

### a) SIGHT

Pay attention to what you see. What colours do you notice? Are the images hazy or clear? Build a visual image of your surroundings, the venue, your teammates and competitors as well as the crowds. Place yourself fully in the situation, not watching yourself as if on TV, but seeing everything through your eyes. You're the star, not the audience!

### b) SOUND

What do you hear? Is there a crowd? The sound of the boat breaking through the waves, etc. etc.

### c) SMELL

Perhaps you can smell the salt air or your dingy wetsuit.

### d) TASTE

Can you taste anything? The salt water splashing into your mouth? You could also imagine sipping your water bottle and the calming effect of its coolness against your pallet. Whatever floats your boat.

### e) TOUCH

Feel the boat beneath your feet and the wind on your face. Pause for a few seconds to ground yourself. Notice the reassuring feeling of your upright but relaxed posture and how solid you feel with your feet placed firmly on the ground as you begin. How do you feel in your hands and your feet, your arms and legs? Are you holding or touching anything? What's the texture on your hands?

## 6) Processes not outcomes

Peak performance imagery is all about seeing the performance you want to see, visualising and believing the result has already happened. While picturing the winning result can be good for confidence, if you don't spend time on the processes that will get you there, it can end up being just an exercise in wishful thinking. Think of all the times you've been successful in the past. What were the actions, movements, techniques, tactics and strategies that led you to that positive outcome? Don't jump ahead to the end! Feel yourself running through the exact motions that produced that win. Picture your body language, feel the contact and really hear yourself communicating effectively with those around you (I mean, it doesn't hurt to actually talk out loud).

## 7) Be in your body

As you run through the practice, embody the imagery. Feel your muscles fire and respond. Adjust your posture to fit your visualisation. You could even add in some physical movements that coincide with the images. Include the emotions that you'll be experiencing during your performance. Feeling nervous and excited? Heart pounding? Add them to your script. You're not trying to remove your emotions but channel them to serve you better. If you start to feel anxiety or doubt creeping in, simply concentrate on your breathing. Pay attention to how soothing it is to feel your breath entering and leaving your body.



## 8) Take your time

Run through the scenario as you would in real life. Make sure you take your time, paying attention to the details. No skipping ahead! The main benefit of mental practice is that you prepare yourself to act and react in real time, so it should last about as long as your physical practice. Imagine it from beginning to end, right up to the successful conclusion.

## 9) Perfect practice

When you hit a stumbling point, imagine the perfect way of responding to the situation. Prepare for all scenarios. Even during mental rehearsal you will find yourself visualising doing something that isn't right or becoming afraid. If it's an external issue, something out of your control, calmly react to it within your mental performance, attempting to turn the tide. Or if you make a mistake, simply rewind your mental TV, break down why it happened, and continue when you can clearly see yourself performing the right actions.

## 10) Victory

Go through the process until you've won the race. (Remember, you have unlimited time/resources to ensure the win in your mind – so no excuse for losing!) Savour your success: What does it look/sound like? Feel the moment. Be the moment!

If that all seemed like a lot to take in, just remember...

## **Mental practice is a skill – that needs practice itself!**

When done properly, mental training is more than just fancy daydreaming. It's a very powerful technique, and a key factor that separates the top-tier athletes from the merely great ones.

It takes effort and concentration, and is especially difficult and tiring when you're first getting started.

But like with any skill, the more you do it, the better you get.

Start small and build up from there. Be consistent with it – just a 10 minute session every day will make a huge difference. And each time, it'll become easier and easier. Try out new and different situations. Be creative and have fun with it!

Soon enough you'll start to notice the difference in your performance and mindset. Unfamiliar tasks will become a breeze, and mentally you'll be prepared for anything.

# HOW TO SUPERCHARGE YOUR MENTAL TRAINING

## Set Process Goals

You may have heard of the '30 Second Bubble' in some sailing circles. It's a reminder to sail the situation you are in – not the situation you *were* in, or *would like* to be in. It helps you to cope with whatever a race throws at you by shutting out anything that happened 30+ seconds ago and focus on the present.

Similarly, breaking your sailing down into processes will keep you from trying to think about everything at once. It's like setting yourself super short-term goals (like executing the perfect gybe in strong winds), which will in turn support your medium- and long-term goals (like winning races and regattas). These process goals are the nuts and bolts of sailing.

Any area where you're lacking confidence is ideal for mental practice. Prioritise the skills that will make you a faster or better sailor.

So...

Which skills are holding you back the most right now?

(for help identifying these, check out the [Sailing Process Prompt List](#) at the end of this ebook)

## Just 10 minutes a day - but be consistent

To get the most out of mental practice, it doesn't have to take over your life. Performance consultant and author Terry Orlick, when working with Canadian Olympic teams, found that 99% of the athletes practised visualisation an average of 12 minutes per day, four times a week.

The key is to treat it like any other practice. Set aside the time to do your mental rehearsal, just as you would for your regular training. Pick a specific time of day – say, after brushing your teeth – and take 10 minutes to run through your chosen process goal.

Work this into your routine and soon enough you'll start to see differences on the water.

## Model yourself on the best

Mental training lets you pretend you're one of the top sailors in the world. I mean, maybe you are already, but there's always someone out there better than you at something! And modelling yourself on others is great for familiarising yourself with new skills before you use them in a real-life setting.

Search for YouTube videos of the pros sailing at the top of their game. Read books to deepen your understanding. Talk about specific challenges with other sailors and coaches, and of course, immerse yourself in the 12 chapters of Road To Gold!

Wherever you get your inspiration, pay close attention to the mindsets, strategies and processes they employ, and incorporate an element into your next mental practice.

## Write it down

Writing highly detailed accounts can be immensely helpful for pinpointing problem areas, planning and setting goals. Go through the competition process from point A to point Z. Break everything down, describing exactly what you see, hear and feel, as well as every little step that's needed for a flawless race. Plan for specific scenarios: 'if X happens, then I will do Y'.

## Record a mental imagery script

Take your writing one step further and make it into a voice recording. You can play this back later during 'dead time' when you're not doing anything productive, or use it in your rehearsals as a type of guided practice.

Rugby legend Jonny Wilkinson would use this technique to mentally prepare before matches:

*"I surface for my usual pre-match ritual of a shave and shower before settling down to listen to a mental rehearsal CD. The script is prepared by myself and [my coach] but read by him. This visualization technique is a sort of clarified daydream with snippets of the atmosphere from past matches included to enhance the sense of reality. It lasts about twenty minutes and by the end of it I feel I know what is coming. The game will throw up many different scenarios but I am as prepared in my own head for them as I can be. If you have realistically imagined situations, you feel better prepared and less fearful of the unexpected."*

## Get physical

The key principle of mental practice: **the closer it is to the real-life scenario, the more effective it will be**. A powerful way to get into the zone is by incorporating physical movement. Lindsey Vonn, one of the most successful skiers of all time, does this by shifting her weight back and forth as if she were on skis, as well as practising the breathing patterns she'll use during the race.

There's no need to keep the images in your head. Add in physical movements that coincide with your imagery, feel the excitement of pulling off a successful performance. As you run through the performance, feel your muscles fire and respond. [This hockey player shows how it's done](#).

Anything that makes the practice feel physically similar to the real scenario will benefit your sessions. Some other ideas:

- Get your heart rate up before starting (arousal control)
- Change into your sailing gear
- Hold some equipment
- Tack and gybe in the bathtub

Silly? Definitely. But if it makes you a better sailor, nobody needs to find out...

## Test + optimise

Shortly before your next training session on the water, run through a mental rehearsal, focusing on a specific area of your sailing. After the session, when you're back on dry land, make some notes about how it went. Rate your performance. What went right and what went wrong? What adjustments can you make next time? Make this the focus of your next mental practice.

## Don't visualise sailing

Olympic champion Greg Louganis, considered the greatest diver of all time, has used mental imagery throughout his career. Now he coaches other athletes to use it, saying “the one thing when I start somebody with visualisation work is that I start with something totally away from whatever activity they're wanting to visualise.”

If you're struggling with sailing-specific imagery, why not try something entirely different? Gently flex your mental practice muscles with something that comes easy to begin with. Then build from up there.

Watch Greg explain his slightly counterintuitive method for teaching visualisation [in this video](#).

## Fake it 'til you make it

Mental practice lets you envision the sailor you want to be. Already seeing yourself can give you the self-belief to stretch and grow into that role.

As Will Smith says: “In my mind, I've always been an A-list Hollywood superstar. Y'all just didn't know yet.”

# MENTAL TRAINING: YOUR NEW SECRET WEAPON

*I'm throwing down the gauntlet:*  
arrive so mentally prepared to your next race  
that your rivals won't know what hit 'em.



# SAILING PROCESSES PROMPT LIST

- Sailing in light airs
- Coping with shifty conditions
- Sailing through waves
- Gybing in strong winds
- Short-tacking against a strong current
- Starting on a biased start line
- Avoiding 'letters' on your results sheet
- Coping with tidal starts
- Starting without a transit
- Starting with a transit
- Mark roundings
- Tactics upwind
- Spinnaker work
- Coping with a difficult crew - or helm!
- Dealing with a protest
- Navigation
- Pre-race planning Having a strategy and sticking to it
- Boat tuning
- Fitness
- Strength
- Covering duels
- Holding on to a lead
- Bouncing back from a mistake
- Mental resilience
- Not getting stuck in the 'pecking order'
- Having a plan for your training sessions
- Sailing at night
- Knowing the rules
- Heavy weather sailing
- Light airs sailing
- Tight reaching
- Windward mark roundings
- Shifting Winds
- Steering through waves
- Practising outside races
- Dealing with aggressive competitors
- Working on your boat
- Light air generally
- Capsizing and recovery
- Close fetching legs
- Thriving under pressure
- Light air starts
- Heavy weather starts
- Downwind starts
- Mass Starts
- Doing well when it really matters
- Racing in very changeable conditions
- Close tactics with other boats
- Competing overseas
- Gate starts
- Reading sailing instructions and courses
- Long races
- Racing in steady winds (ie boat speed contests)
- Sailing in big fleets
- Racing against international competition
- Having an incident that badly affects the rest of your race