Mental preparation for hockey players: Study on self-talk and mental imagery

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This bachelor thesis is a study of mental preparation, and how to go it through with players. Objective is to find easy way to start teaching mental preparation for players and two main themes were mental imagery and self-talk.

This report includes theory part of different concepts of mental preparation and extensive theory parts of mental imagery and self-talk. The practical section is made of the lessons that players were taught during the season and assignment that they were given. The analysis part includes surveys that players did before and after these teaching periods.

Testing groups that were used in this project were Pelicans U16 and Vierumäki United U20 teams. Pelicans U16 started working with self-talk and Vierumäki United with mental imagery. Both teams used one month in to one topic and then changed it. Total teaching period was two months. Thesis was started on summer 2014 and teaching part was made in start of year 2015.

Results were that we found an easy way to start developing mental skills for junior hockey players and players taught that mental imagery was easier to use before performance and in learning new skills. Self-talk was found easier and better to use during performance and it gave new energy to players between the shifts.

Keywords
Mental preparation, mental imagery, self-talk, ice hockey, coaching, concentration
# Table of contents

1 Introduction.......................................................................................................................... 1

2 Mental skills that affect to performance preparation ...................................................... 2
   2.1 Arousal.......................................................................................................................... 4
   2.2 Anxiety.......................................................................................................................... 5
      2.2.1 Relaxation......................................................................................................... 6
   2.3 Goal setting.................................................................................................................. 7
   2.4 Concentration.............................................................................................................. 8
   2.5 Routines........................................................................................................................ 9

3 Self-talk................................................................................................................................ 11
   3.1 What is self-talk ......................................................................................................... 11
   3.2 Self-talk to players ..................................................................................................... 13

4 Mental Imagery................................................................................................................... 14
   4.1 What is mental imagery ............................................................................................ 14
   4.2 Mental Imagery to players........................................................................................ 15

5 Empirical part..................................................................................................................... 17
   5.1 Project planning......................................................................................................... 17
   5.2 Project Implementation............................................................................................ 18
      5.2.1 Survey.............................................................................................................. 19
   5.3 Project outcome ........................................................................................................ 20
      5.3.1 Teaching part: mental imagery..................................................................... 20
      5.3.2 Teaching part: self-talk.................................................................................. 22
      5.3.3 U16 .................................................................................................................. 24
      5.3.4 U20 .................................................................................................................. 25

6 Results.................................................................................................................................. 27
   6.1 Comparison between teams..................................................................................... 31

7 Discussion........................................................................................................................... 33

8 Bibliography........................................................................................................................ 36

9 Attachments........................................................................................................................ 40
1 Introduction

“Mental will is a muscle that needs exercise, just like muscles of the body.”
(Lynn Jennings)

In high-level sport the difference between a winner and a loser are so small that the most crucial difference is on the mental side. Common feature of great athletes is a strong mind and capability to perform their best in competitions. For some athletes it is easier to handle pressures and get the best out of themselves when it is needed the most. It is also possible to train those mental aspects and psychological strength the same way as physical strength.

Mental training and coaching has increased dramatically during last 10 years. One of the biggest challenges for coaches and athletes is how to get 100 per cent out of the athlete in every game. The thought was how to start mental training with hockey players between 15 and 20 years old. There are hundreds of books and thousands of webpages about mental training and preparation, but the desire was to find an easy way to get thing started.

Chapter two goes through different conceptions of mental preparation and there is some theory of both. Chapters three and four deals with our main topics which are Self-talk and mental imagery. It goes through the theory of those topics and practical ways to athlete how to use them. The fifth chapter contains the practical part where it is explained what players were taught and what were the results gotten out of the surveys. Also a comparison was made about the differences between U16 players and U20 players, and what should been taking into account when starting mental training with different age groups.
Mental skills that affect to performance preparation

Sport psychology in science perspective is usually focused on athlete’s mental well-being and to the development of athletes’ performance. It is very common that the main emphasize is to develop one’s performance through mental training. Training process is built to improve athlete’s mental skills. Those mental skills include self-confidence, motivation, commitment to one’s work, relaxation and the skill to concentrate on right things.

Basic mental training can be divided into three phases. The first is instruction, where athletes learn about mental training and the importance of it. During the second phase, called an acquisition phase, athletes learn more specifically about psychological strategies and techniques and how they effect. In the last phase athletes start to use their knowledge in practical way. They said training takes place in practice and competitions. (Kahrović, Radenković, Mavrić & Murić, 2014, 53)

Different preperformance routines are an important aspect of all the mental skills. Mental training includes different type of pre performance routines that athletes use. Most common are anxiety and arousal control, self-talk, concentration, mental imagery and mental practice. Practicing of these skills and handling them is directly related to optimal athletic performance (Gallucci, 2008). There is brief information of all of these different skills in following chapters.

Mental training and mastering mental skills is often the deciding factor that separates winner from other athletes. In the elite level the differences between athletes are hundredths of a second or mere few centimeters, so self-confidence and other mental aspects are the key to success. On average 90 per cent of the North American athletes used mental imagery in Olympics. (Marsh, 2014, 115)

Practicing mental skills requires a lot of concentration, readiness, time and effort spent on it on a daily basis. It might be difficult to encourage athletes who are not self-motivated to practice those skills regularly. Athletes who have strong desire to succeed and win, will be ready to work with mental skills and that is the biggest reason which
makes them even better and more successful (Gallucci, 2008). A lot of times athletes with the most desire to win need this even more because those athletes gets anxious easier and experience more pressure.

Mental preparation should always be practiced before competition. If athlete tries new technics first time, it may take too much energy to just to focus on the preparation and not the performance. That is the reason why an athlete should practice preparation technics before the competition or in smaller competitions. Proper mental preparation can last a whole day or just a few hours before the performance. There is a example of Olympic level short putters routines in table 1. (Judge, 2010, 6)

**Table 1. Sample Pre-Competition Routine for a Shot Putter (Judge, 2010, 6)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4 hours prior</th>
<th>2 hours prior</th>
<th>1 hour prior</th>
<th>30 min. prior</th>
<th>20 min. prior</th>
<th>Competition</th>
<th>Post competition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video review</td>
<td>Arrive at the competition site and set up camp</td>
<td>Execute a series of planned walks, jogs, and skips to increase body temperature</td>
<td>Execute a specific warm up drills to set up technique</td>
<td>Execute a predetermined number of warm-up throws</td>
<td>Counts breaths in between throws to refocus for next throw</td>
<td>Review competitive strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visualize proper technique</td>
<td>Walk over and examine throwing venue</td>
<td>Begin to achieve physical arousal</td>
<td>Count breaths in between throws to re-focus for the next throw</td>
<td>Positive self-talk: no negative thoughts about or during throwing warm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review technical cues worked on in the previous week of practice</td>
<td>Count breaths if one loses focus until concentration is once again reached</td>
<td>Positive self-talk: no negative thoughts about or during warm-up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive self-talk: review all reasons why athlete should do well that meet.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.1 Arousal

“The term arousal has been referred to as activation, excitation, readiness or drive. It represents a physiological intensity of behavioral ranging from deep sleep to extreme excitement” (Leith, 2006, 91).

In most studies, stress and arousal go hand in hand because they often have similar effects. Heart and respiration rate, extent of sweating and other physiological factors are frequently related to arousal. Studies have also shown positive (e.g. joy, excitement) and negative emotions (e.g. fear, embarrassment) related to arousal. These emotions may influence to athletes’ physiological performance. (Anshel, 2012, 125-126)

Each sport includes different skills and circumstances during performance. This also has affect to optimal arousal level. It means that lower the skill or task is, the optimal arousal level will be higher than in extremely high and specific skill required sport. In most situations, higher skills or task requires more decision-making and extra concentration on single performance. Easier tasks and skills can be performed with basic concentration but often needs to run with extra drive or aggression to be successfully completed. For example, if golf player and football player is compared, golf player don’t need extremely high arousal level in his or her decisive put, but football player needs to be extremely aroused to tackle and fight in the field. Skill level is also one influential thing when talking arousal levels. Top athletes have already practiced their skills to automatic level. They can perform without thinking will they execute certain skill or not, and that means their arousal level can be higher to perform in optimal level. In youth or amateur sports where skills aren’t automatic, lower arousal level will help to execute in optimal performance level. Higher arousal level would be harmless to concentrate on task at hand. This is one reason why in extra competitive and stressful situations top athletes will perform better than novices. (Leith, 2006, 92-94)

Music is very often used in sports and sports events, but it’s also known as a helpful for athlete’s mental mindset and arousal level. Faster and more aggressive music will increase players’ adrenaline and activate body for faster reactions and movement speed.
Slower music will make the opposite; relax, remove arousal and calm body for performance. It’s important that the listener will enjoy the music, if not, it will do harm for one’s preparation. (Anshel, 2012, 167-168)

2.2 Anxiety

Sport competitions are very nervous and threatening situations because of the nature of competing. Other team or athlete will win and other side will lose. In an individual’s mind, losing is harmful and menacing to their self-esteem. Circumstances will create extra anxiety as there is always someone to watch, judge and observe. Because of these natural factors, anxiety is very common and well known among sports. These internal and external factors will create anxiety to athletes, that’s why there are countless athletes who perform well in practice but crumble or “choke”, in a game situation. If athletes don’t learn how to manage their anxiety in threatening or pressure situations, they will never reach their full potential during their career. (Anshel, 2012, 126)

Pineschi defines anxiety as an “emotional response characterize by a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system (Spielberg, 1979). A temporary anxiety condition would then comprise of two components: a mental (cognitive) component consisting of negative expectations about success or negative self-evaluation (Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990); and a physiological (somatic) component corresponding to increased heart rate, shortness of breath, sweaty hands, butterflies in the stomach, increased muscle tension, cold sweat, etc. (Le Scanff, Hardy, & Larue, 1999). In a sport context, two factors during competitions lead to a perception of threat and thus, to the state of anxiety: (a) uncertainty about the outcome, namely, uncertainty about winning or losing; and (b) importance of the outcome, namely, the importance of obtaining extrinsic and intrinsic rewards (Marchant, Morris, & Andersen, 1998; Martens et al., 1990).”(Pineschi, Di pietro, 2013, 2)

Spielberger (1966) proposed the theory that splits anxiety to state and trait sections. State anxiety, also called A-state, is often defined as an emotional and trait anxiety (A-trait) is based on motive or behavioral disposition (Spielberger, 1966, 17). State anxiety
is often associated with physiological arousal, higher nervous system activity and a momentary feeling. Trait anxiety definition is based on individual’s feelings in nervous situations and to response to those with state anxiety. (Horn, 2012, 209)

Performing under high pressure is a very emotional experience. It is common that athlete might choke in a high-pressure situation. Baumeister and Shower (1986) told that pressure arises when a punishment or reward is contingent upon the performance in situation. It is common that when the performance is important or there is no second chance to succeed, pressure gets higher. Level of pressure is also depends on “stakes”. “Stakes” can be objectives (money), social status or even personal standards. Also situations where for example the competition performance is compared between (co-) actors are highest pressure situations. (Kliegel, Beckmann, 2006, 9)

“For example the size of the audience, its (perceived) status and its salience appears to influence the importance of the situation and consequently performance. But more importantly the expectancy of the audience seems to be crucial: if performers feel they have to perform up to spectators’ expectations, they appear more likely to choke” (Kliegel, Beckmann, 2006, 10)

It is found that some athletes choke under high pressure easier than others and while others use it to gain energy. Wang, Marchant, Morris and Gibbs (2005) found that athletes high in somatic anxiety were more likely to choke under pressure in an athletic setting. They also found a positive relation between self-consciousness and choking, with athletes high in private self-consciousness showing poor performance. (Kliegel, Beckmann, 2006, 10)

### 2.2.1 Relaxation

Relaxation is very common and popular technique among athletes and sport psychologists. It’s an effective technique to reduce stress and anxiety that are often shown in competitive sports. There is a large variety of relaxation techniques but purpose is the same: to reduce muscle tension, anxiety, and improves athlete’s concentration and self-confidence. (Anshel, 2012, 163)
Progressive relaxation, biofeedback, meditation and breathing techniques are common methods used to reduce anxiety and promote relaxation. First, progressive relaxation is a technique where athlete tenses a single muscle group and then relaxes it. This will produce a relaxed and calm state through body. Next technique is biofeedback where athlete is connected to a computer through electrodes or heart rate monitor. This teaches athlete to control his/her anxiety states and physical tension by relaxing the mind and the body while watching results from computer. Feedback is immediate and accurate and this allows athlete to try and learn the best technique to relax. (Kornspan, 2009, 48)

One common technique in meditation, even used by the legendary Phil Jackson, is repeating single word that athletes will focus to, such as “easy” or “calm”. The goal of this technique is to let everything else through without giving it any attention. This will lead to a relaxed and calm state. Final technique on this subject is breathing techniques. (Kornspan, 2009, 48)

When an athlete suffers from anxiety, the breathing rate often increases and this increases the anxiety even further. There is large variety of breathing techniques but the main object is to get athletes focus on breathing process, which often is forgotten when in an anxious state. Most techniques include long and slow inhales and exhales, which calms breathing rhythm and as a result, athlete will be more relaxed. Also counting during breathing helps athlete to focus for breathing process. (Kornspan, 2009, 48)

2.3 Goal setting

“Webster’s New World Dictionary defined a goal as an objective or end that one strives to attain; an aim. The worlds leading goal-setting researcher defined goal as simply as what an individual trying accomplish; it is the object or aim of an action”. (Horn, 2012, 461)

Locke & Latham has found five vital points to goal setting in their researches. 1) Specific and enough difficult goals will lead to better performance and higher
motivation than indefinite and easy goals. 2) Short-term goals will increase the progression to long-term goal achievement. 3) Goals have positive affects to performance, persistence and concentration at the task on hand. 4) Feedback is necessary during the goals setting process. 5) Athlete must accept goals that they can affect positively on performance. (Locke & Latham, 1985, 1)

Very common goal setting strategy and recommended by most sport psychologies is SMART acronym. SMART is very simple yet effective way to start the goal setting process. Based on this strategy, the goals should be specific, measured, action-oriented, realistic and timely. (Maitland & Gervis, 2009, 2)

When discussing of different types of goal setting, next three approaches appear most frequently: outcome, performance and process goals. Outcome goals are attached to result of competition, winning or losing. Individual athlete doesn’t have full control over reaching an outcome goal, because it depends on teams and opponents effort also. Performance goals are athletes’ individual goals and are not related to teams or opponents performance. Athlete is responsible for the execution in performance goals, because other players or team are not related to goal achievement. Process goals, differently than other two, are used mostly in practice by performing a certain skill. (Weinberg, 2010, 58)

“Locke & Latham (1990) has also emphasized that each goal has basic parts: direction or product quantity or quality. Direction means the choice about how focus one’s behavior and product quality or quantity proposes a minimal effort of performance that must be achieved”. (Horn 2012, 462)

2.4 Concentration

Concentration is the goal where all the mental skills are heading. It is state of mind where things around you don’t distract you.

“Concentration has been described as a learned skill of becoming absorbed in tasks and not reacting to or being disturbed by irrelevant stimuli.” (Gallucci, 2008, 96)
Elite athletes have usually a skill to block internal and external distractions during performance. Blocking distractions demands high self-confidence and good concentration skills. Human being can only concentrate well in limited amount of things at the same time, so too many distractions can limit the success in most important things. (Gallucci, 2008, 96-97)

Moran (2006) suggested four techniques to improve concentration: 1) specify performance goals – actions that athlete’s control, 2) individual routines, 3) mood words; and 4) mental practice.

1) Specific performance goals helps athlete to direct his/her concentration to different game situations and makes preparation less stressful. 2) Individual routines improve one’s concentration and performance. It also reduces stress and anxiety before performance. Post-mistake routines helps athlete to leave mistakes and make athlete able to re-focus at the task on hand. 3) Mood words can be silent (i.e. self-talk) or aloud. Mood words can include motivational, instructional, words for concentration and positive or negative feedback. 4) Mental practice is described here as a visualization. Athlete visualizes himself/herself performing different skills with success. It helps athlete to focus before competition. Visualization also helps athlete to prepare mentally in different situations on performance. (Anshel, 2012, 33-34)

2.5 Routines

Routines are preparations and actions that are done before the event. It includes whole aspect of living like sleep, diet as well as physical and other ways to get ready before event. Elite athletes practice these things and take every small detail in to consideration before performance to make possible for them self be as ready as possible before an event. With routines athlete gets a feeling of safety and often it makes him more ready for an event mentally. Going through routines and doing the same thing before each event can lower athlete’s anxiety level and make pressure easier to handle. (Anshel, 2012, 23-24)
Routines are beneficial for one’s decision-making and problem solving as they will reduce the amount of energy and time spent thinking. It also helps athlete to maintain emotional control (specifically under pressure) and to regulate physical, mental and emotional performance preparation. Also self-control and the ability to concentrate on the task under pressure increases through routines. (Anshel, 2012, 23-24)

Pre-performance routines can sometimes be very specific and tight. It is known that if the routines are too tight, it can build more pressure to athlete. For example, if there are no possibilities to do all your warm-up routines or the time of event is different, it can make the athlete anxious and not comfortable before the performance. Positive routines are self-talk and mental imagery based concentration before performance. (Gallucci, 2008, 70)

Singer (2002) referred that the goal of using pre-performance routines is to get you in an optimal mindset instantly prior to execute and stay there through performance. (Moran, Valker & Graig, 2012, 38)
3 Self-talk

3.1 What is self-talk

Hackfort and Schwenkmezger (1993) described self-talk very accurately by saying: “Internal dialogue in which the individuals interpret feelings and perceptions, regulate and change evaluation an cognitions and give themselves instructions and reinforcement”. (Zourbanos, 2013, 54-55)

Sport psychologists have introduced self-talk into athletes in psychological training to regulate their cognitions, behaviors, emotions and improving performance. Self-talk is also often related to improving self-confidence and self-image. There are not many studies based on if self-talk can really improve individual’s performance in competition, but reason to the lack of evidence is that self-talk has not gained much attention in comparison to other mental skills strategies like imagery and goal setting. That is why self-talk is often used for other reasons than to improve one’s performance. It is an effective way to improve self-efficacy, to learn new techniques or to deal with non-performance related issues like media relationships. (Mellalieu & Hanton, 2008, 37-38)

Hardy (2006) identifies that self-talk differs from other mental skill strategies and cognitive processes (e.g. imagery, day dreaming). “An emphasis was placed on the sport-orientated statements that athletes say to themselves as opposed to their general (non-sport thoughts)”. Each individual has unconscious thoughts and it is possible that self-statements appear automatically and self-talk and techniques (e.g. thought stopping) would direct them to sport-related thinking. (Mellalieu & Hanton, 2008, 37-38)

Hardy also identified different dimensions based on the nature of self-talk. This included frequency dimension, which is related to how often individual uses self-talking. It includes also an openness dimension, which considers if self-talk is performed overtly and is audible to others or is it covertly and inaudible to others. Self-talk also varies largely from being positive and offering praise and hope, ranging to negative criticism, but also to motivational understanding, which overlaps slightly with
content of self-talk but has differences in one’s view of has it motivational or de-
motivational content included. (Mellalieu & Hanton, 2008, 37-38)

The last dimension that Hardy identified was about reasons to use self-talk in sports. Two general functions that were shown in the studies were being self-instructive and motivational, and both have been divided into more specific functions. Cognitive-specific self-talk facilitates athlete to learn and execute certain skill (e.g. slap shot). Second, cognitive general self-talk promotes athletes general concentration. (Mellalieu & Hanton, 2008, 37-38)

“First, cognitive-specific self-talk helps athlete to learn and execute individual skills (e.g. wrist shot). Second, cognitive general self-talk helps athlete to concentrate on overall performance (e.g. intensify game) and to execute strategies (e.g. high pressure to opponent). Conversely, the motivational function can be divided into three functions. First, motivational mastery function is related to mental toughness, focus, confidence and mental preparation – all demands athlete to control his/her circumstances. Second, motivational-arousal function helps athletes to, relax, psych themselves up before event, and also control their arousal and anxiety levels. Third, motivational-drive function is global than other two functions. It is connected to keeping athlete track on his/her achievements and individual goals.” (Mellalieu & Hanton, 2008, 37-38)

Ungerleider (1996) suggested that the “ultimate goal of teaching self-talk is to have athlete achieve sense of mastery – a proficiency that becomes automatic”. Mahoney & Avener (1977) reinforced this statement by conducting a study from practice and competition situations where athletes used self-talk extensively. The study showed a correlation between positive self-talk and higher self-confidence. Other study by Van Raalte, Brewer, Petitpas and Riviera (1994) looked in to self-talk among competitive junior tennis players. This showed that self-talk in among junior players was mostly negative and it followed a point loss. From this it can be concluded that negative self-talk may be harmful for one’s performance. In contrary, the study showed that using
positive statements followed points won and less use of negative self-talk. (Rogerson, 1998, 2-5)

3.2 Self-talk to players

Studies have shown that positive self-talk helps performance preparation, concentration at the task on hand, increasing self-confidence and other beneficial influences. How to teach self-talk to players? A human brain produces approximately 50,000 thoughts per day (National Science Foundation) and a hockey player’s brain does the same, also during on and off-ice practices. It is important to identify negative thoughts, write them on a paper and start to replace them by positive ones. It’s also important to notice when self-talk takes place in player’s mind. Rushall (1984) divided general positive self-talk and thought strategy in to three sections:

1) Technical/tactical – task specific content, instructional words and individual skills instructions
2) Self-affirming – ego boosting thoughts, self-confidence building and thoughts to keep concentration at the task on hand
3) Mood words – key words to manage emotions, optimal arousal and anxiety level and keep positive feeling.

Rushall recommended that 70% of thoughts should exert task specific items while 30% should be general positive self-talk and/or mood words. Martin (1994) proposed that positive self-talk and mood words should be changed every few weeks so that the effectiveness continues. (Rogerson, 1998, 2-5)
4 Mental Imagery

4.1 What is mental imagery

Mental imagery is one of the most used mental simulations in whole sporting world. Most people think that it only includes imagery in your head and image visualization, but in fact it also includes sounds, scents, touch and tastes. Mental imagery can also include body movement, talk and emotions.

“Mental imagery consists of intentionally bringing images to mind or rehearsing performances without actually physically enacting the performance. Mental imagery is not limited to visualization, and it has been recommended that it involve all the senses.” (Gallucci, 2008, 96)

Porter (2013) explains how athlete can feel visualization different ways and with different instincts.

Some people can “see” within their mind. This means they can actually see a picture. Some see this picture from within, seeing their performance as if they are in their own body and looking out. They see the track in front of them as they run or the balance beam before them as they mount to begin their routine. Others see from without; in other words they watch themselves perform. To be able to do both would be optimum. Some athletes have strong physical feelings. They are more aware how performance feels than what the performance looks like. When they visualize, they don’t see a picture; instead they have a feeling, a gut reaction a physical response or memory. Others may visualize and experience their performance by how it sounds. – The crowd, the voices within, the words of support from teammates, the footsteps of the runner behind them, the music and rhythm they perform to hear during a game, and so on. (Porter, 2013, 61)
Mental imagery is used before competition and practices to create a possibility to improve performance. Mental imagery can enhance physical practice also and enable athletes to develop better.

Mental imagery is not a replacement for physical practice or development. When physical practice and psychological practice are combined on a daily basis they compliment each other. Mental practice can make a huge impact on the daily physical practice and development. With mental imagery you can learn skills faster, so in some situations it can substitute, or at least shorten the physical aspect of training. (Gallucci, 2008, 84-85)

4.2 Mental Imagery to players

Mental imagery can involve the execution of specific sport skills, group of skills in larger routines, or entire game plans (Gallucci, 2008).

Ice hockey player can visualize a simple situation such as scoring a goal or giving a pass to a defender during a power play. Pregame imagery can be described as the moment when players imagine interactive plays and strategies with teammates.

Imagery that promotes the acquisition of sport skills is considered to serve a cognitive function related to either specific skills (cognitive specific) or general strategies in sport (cognitive general) (Paivio, 1985). Imagery focused on the steps necessary for goal attainment serves more of a motivational function. Motivational general imagery augments affect and arousal; motivational specific imagery focuses on the specific steps for goal attainment. (Gallucci, 2008, 85)

The direction of imagery can be towards imagining success or failure. It is found that thinking positive images and happenings before game can cause more positive things than when thinking of a failure.

“With practice, imagery generally becomes more controllable and vivid.” (Evans, Jones & Mullen, 2004; Rodgers, Hall & Buckolz, 1991; Gallucci, 2008, 86)
Mental imagery in ice hockey can include a lot of different things, but the most common ways are to do with scoring and goaltending. The highest scorers often go through scoring changes on their head before the game and score the goals from different angles many times already before the game has even started. When the player has scored a goal or has played the situation already through in their head, it’s possible to react faster during the actual game.

Easiest way to start mental imagery is to start to think individual game-related situations. Player can think how he is going to score and take his stick on his hand at the same time, now engaging two different instincts. Watching videos showing positive things of player’s own games or practice is also good way to start imagery.

(Gallucci, 2008, 86-87)
5 Empirical part

5.1 Project planning

The idea for this project emerged in April 2014 during a meeting regarding how to utilize the already possessed knowledge of mental preparation before games and practices. Nowadays differences between teams and individual players are minimal, and because of that the advantage comes from psychological side. Some players are born as mentally stronger but like the physical side, mental aspects are also a trainable. Coaches thrive to get everything out of their players and the team every day, so the idea was to create a tool which allows the players to learn more about mental preparation easily and in a short time.

The process began by finding out information and knowledge of different type of mental skills before and during performance. There are several different aspects and ways to mental preparation, so we decided to focus in two most common and easiest techniques: mental imagery and self-talk. Most of the players knew something of self-talk and mental imagery as a concept, but they didn’t know how to use it in practice. Calculated mental preparation is still a quite strange concept to most of young players so the decision was made to approach it from a really simple and easy way. We thought that it is also easier way not to mess up player’s heads too much at the same time.

The main objective was to find a simple way to start coaching and developing the players’ mental preparation before performance. It was assumed that it would be easier for the coach to go through the main things in the beginning and then to get in-depth with it with the more motivated players. Second objective was to find out how much players know about mental preparation and how much is possible to develop their mental skills with an easy tool. Third objective was to go through different kind of mental preparation styles by giving examples of how to use them and also tell about advantages for mental skill development.
5.2 Project Implementation

Object of the theoretical part is to go through different techniques of mental preparations and concentration. It gives a good view of what the most common ways to pre-performance preparations are. The theoretical part of the thesis is divided in three parts. In the first chapter different types of mental preparation are covered (Table 2) and what do the different concepts mean clarified. It gives simple information about what the different concepts are and what is the process before performance on mental side. The topics are Arousal, anxiety, goal setting, concentration, routines and relaxation.

Second chapter describes the aspects of self-talk, by clarifying the history of self-talk and what it includes. The second part covers how self-talk is used in sports and in ice hockey, and also how can it be taught for players. There is also an example how the athletes can use self-talk before and during performance.

In third chapter we go through mental imagery and it provides answers to the following questions; what is mental imagery and how it is used. There are also examples directly related to ice hockey and how elite players use them.

Table 2, Mind map of whole theory part

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory part</th>
<th>Arousal</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>Goal-setting</th>
<th>Routines</th>
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<td>Mental imagery</td>
<td>What is mental imagery</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the theory part is a section where players explained what does self-talk (Attachment 1) and mental imagery (Attachment 2) stand for and how are they used in
sports. After first lessons players were given some questions of pre-performance preparations (Attachment 3) and after the learning period a new set of questions were gone through which showed how players felt about those techniques (Attachment 4).

In result section it is gone through how did the players felt before and after learning periods and did they learn anything. Also a comparison was made between the two age groups and the question if age chances their feelings of these techniques was discussed.

5.2.1 Survey

The research included two different surveys; initial one which was conducted in the early stage after first mental skills presentation and the final survey which concluded the research. The objective of the survey was to gain knowledge of players’ mental skills and readiness, but also that the individual would start to think about his mental skills, weaknesses and strength. By noticing them, the motivation for player to practice mental skills increases. The objective in the final survey was to get knowledge of the players’ feelings about the mental skills process: did the player notice benefits or development during the process and will he use mental skills strategies in future. Some data about the benefits of self-talk and mental imagery was collected.

First survey included a scale 1-5 rating (1=totally disagree, 5=totally agree) and it was conducted as anonymous to reach a maximum level of honesty. Overall 15 questions were asked in survey, all of them related to the psychological aspects. Questions were based on details that either self-talk or mental imagery could improve or are connected to. Surveys were conducted after a mental skills presentation which included knowledge of skill as well as tasks to upcoming practices and week.

Second, and also the final survey was carried out at the end of the research. Final inquiry included six normal questions with a scale from 1 to 5, and two questions with multiple choice answers. Questions were associated with earlier questions but with the idea of progression in skills. An attempt was made to find as much benefits as possible which players noticed during the mental skills training.
5.3 Project outcome

At first theory part was studied and created to get a wider perspective about what pre-performance preparation includes. Of this the idea to focus on the two main parts that are easiest to approach from players view was obtained. Two different teaching periods were created, one for self-talk and other one to mental imagery. One teaching period includes an information part where the players were told what the two aspects are and how they can be used in different ways. Simultaneously the players were taught through the examples how they can use those techniques in their own life. Teaching part took part at the start of the period, after which lecture information was printed to the players and placed in to the locker room, where player were able to read them again during this period. One period lasted from three to four weeks and at the start of every week players get new assignments and tasks.

The two groups were Pelicans U16 team and Vierumäki United U20 team. Both groups included 20 players. Pelicans U16 team started with the self-talk and Vierumäki United U20 started with mental-imagery and topics were changed after 4 weeks. The testing part took 2 months and after which the content was gone through with the players once more. Then players answered the final survey which provided information regarding which one of the main techniques they feel better about and do they feel that they will use those technics in future.

5.3.1 Teaching part: mental imagery

The initial lecture for the players lasted 30 minutes. In mental imagery (attachment 1) players first got a view what does mental imagery mean as a concept and then nine different situations where mental imagery can be used in their life. Those nine situations were:

- self-confidence
- motivation
- focus
- emotional control
- efficient of technical training
• improving the game view
• preparation to competition
• way of working during injuries
• problem solving

For every point players had a task to think how mental imagery can be used in those situations. After that different techniques what players could use in those situations were gone through. In the end players got assignments for the first week which were:

• Imagine one game situation what you are going to do in the practice (Example: scoring, stealing the puck, passing and save) before you go on to the ice.
• Imagine one game situation on the ice prior to performing it.

On the second week players were supposed to do some mental imagery at home and try to think situation outside the rink.

• Find a peaceful place (example your own room) and lay down on the floor or on the bed with your eyes closed. Choose one 10 to 15 minutes lasting running route that you have been running many times before. Relax your whole body and mind and start imaging yourself running that route. Move ahead in your mind as fast as you would move in real life. Try to feel every step in your body and create a feeling in your mind what is it like when you are running in real life. Try to image some scents and scenery that you might meet during that route. Forget everything else around you and focus only on running. After the running observe what kind of feelings your body went through during exercise. Did you feel a higher heart rate, get out of breath or maybe some muscle tension? Repeat this exercise two or three times during the week.

At the third week players went deeper from the first week’s assignment, we wanted them to think game situations little bit longer.

• Imagine game situation just like at the first week (scoring, stealing the puck, passing and save) and try to imagine it little bit longer. Think where the situation could start. Example: how you move in the rink and find open space before the receiving pass and after that what do you do first? Where do you
look at? Which position your body is? How does it feel in your body and then
go through what are you going to do. Choose one game situation for whole
week and go that through every time before practice and during it.

On the fourth week we did not give any assignment to players. We wanted to them
find out their own best way to do it. After the week, 60% of the U20 team and 75% of
the under U16 team told that they had tried those thing during the week. That fact was
based on simple anonymous questionnaire to players.

5.3.2 Teaching part: self-talk

Teaching part of the self-talk (attachment 2) was quite similar than the teaching part of
mental imagery. At the start the players were taught what self-talk is and how it is used.
Players were told that self-talk could affect to players following ways:

- focus gets better
- learning gets easier
- it is easier to get over of mistakes
- it leads to better overall performances
- it gives better self-confidence
- negative thoughts lowers performances in all of those things

Players have also been taught that self-talk can be actual talk or just words inside the
head. In the main part self-talk is separated into three categories

1. Technical/tactical
   Self-talk includes individual tasks during the practice. Examples: “Shoot straight
   from skating”, “Pass hard” or “keep on moving all the time”

2. Strengthening self-confidence
   Strengthening includes phrases that gets players self-confidence higher and give
   player more energy. Examples: “I am important to team”, “I can win difficult
   situations” or “I am a good player”
3. Key words

Key words help the player to get into the right mood before or during the game. Examples: "Keep calm, I can handle this", “Now wake up you can be better” or “It is a great day to play hockey”

After the teaching part players got their first assignments, how to start using self-talk.

- Try to recognize negative thoughts. When you recognize negative thought replace it with positive ones.
- During the practice say to yourself or think some individual technical aspect inside the performance like “pass hard” or “Shoot in the right top corner”

At the second week players assignment was about strengthening self-confidence.

- Create yourself two self-confidence strengthening phrases. One for time before practice and for during practice time. Use those words everyday during the week.

On a third week players were told to keep on working with one of the already learned technic and also create themselves some spirit phrases or words.

- Create yourself three phrases that you can use rest of the season.
  1) Phrase that give you energy and power when you are tired or give you energy before practice and games.
  2) Phrase that helps you to get over from some mistake and bring your self-confidence back up.
  3) Phrase that helps you to calm down if you get angry or too excited during practice and games.

On the fourth week players brought back third week’s phrases to the coaches and they created a poster of all of those words and put them in the locker room. Posters also travel with the team to away games.
Following figure 1 present results from first survey. Survey was made in the beginning of mental skills training process. Results show that presentations were clear and everybody understood how and why each mental skills are used. This was the starting point for the study. General information about players mental skill level and readiness was gathered, and survey gave players aspect to think their mental skills. Based on the results, there were players who hadn’t used self-talk (50%) or mental imagery (20%) before this process. Also there were differences seen between players in a statement about one’s high self-confidence. 40% slightly disagreed and 5% totally disagreed about their own self-confidence level.

There were also differences in questions that were based on concentration. Results show that young players have problems to either aim concentration on performance (20% slightly disagreed) and/or keep focused through performance (25% slightly disagreed). Differences were also seen in ability to forget a failure, where 35% on players felt that they have problems in forgetting a mistake or a failure.

Two of the questions were related to each other, do I think positively before performance and do I recognize negative thoughts. Results showed similarity, 30% of players felt that they don’t think positively before performance and that 25% don’t recognize negative thoughts. When player learns to recognize negative thoughts, he is able to learn to replace them with positive one’s and that’s how positivity appears more often in players thoughts. There were no differences in players’ belief of mental skills.
5.3.4 U20

Results from first survey in figure 2 from the U20s shows that older players have gained more mental skills than younger ones. As in the previous one, also this figure shows total agreement of understanding how and why mental skills are used. Most of the players had used mental imagery and/or self-talk before this study. Results show that 40% of older players have also problems in forgetting a failure. Question regarding feeling on the morning of a game day showed overall 35% disagreement. Players didn’t feel that they are ready and didn’t feel good about themselves.

Results show that older players are mentally more competent to concentrate before and through performance than younger ones. Same similarities were shown in questions about positive thinking and recognizing negative thoughts, 20% disagreements in both questions. Overall players’ self-
confidence (70% agreed) and mental readiness (70% agreed) were in high level at the
beginning of the process. Players agreement were also high in belief of mental skills,
players feel that it can improve one’s performance.

(Figure 2.)
6 Results

This chapter includes discussion about results of the study, comparison between the results of the two groups and discussion about benefits and possible disadvantages. The following figures show collected data and results of the study. Figures that include name u16 are results from Pelicans C1-99 team and figures with u20 are from Vierumäki United A-juniors.

Figure 3 shows that during mental training process players from u16 have increased their self-confidence from 50% (Figure 1) to 60% Also as much as 40% of players answered in Figure 1 that their self-confidence level is not high while in Figure 3 the number was only 10%.

Results show that players were able to use mental imagery better in practice situations, 60% slightly agreed and 25% totally agreed, than self-talk. But on the other hand players are willing to use self-talk rather in the future than mental imagery. Figure shows also that players believe that mental training can improve their performance; there were no disagreements in results.
When comparing Figure 2 to Figure 4, there can be seen a slight increase in the players’ level of self-confidence. 55% slightly agreed and 15% totally agreed in Figure 2 while 60% slightly agreed and 20% totally agreed in Figure 4. Players were much more able to use mental imagery (40% slightly agreed and 20% totally agreed) in practice situation than self-talk (20% totally agreed, no slight agreements). Based on questionnaires (figure 3 and figure 4) Players are willing to use self-talk rather than mental imagery in future. Also there were no disagreements in belief of the statement that mental training can improve one’s performance.

(Figure 4.)

Figure 5 shows results from multiple questionnaires about the benefits of self-talk. Even 32% of players felt that self-talk helped them to focus on performance. 21% felt that self-talk facilitated skill learning. Other three categories were quite even in percentages.
Figure 6 shows the results from multiple questionnaires about benefits of mental imagery. Players felt that mental imagery works best in learning situation. 27% of players noticed effect of mental imagery in skills learning and 22% in game situation learning.
Following figure shows results of u20 team’s answers about the benefits of self-talk. 37% of players felt that self-talk helps focusing on performance. The players also thought that self-talk facilitated pre-performance preparation and skill learning, both got 19% of answers.

(Figure 7.)

Figure 8 shows the results of the u20 team’s answers of mental imagery benefits. Players felt that mental imagery helped in skill learning (31%), focusing on performance (21%) and with pre-performance preparation (18%).

(Figure 8.)
6.1 Comparison between teams

Objectives of study were the gain knowledge of the effectiveness of mental skills in a short period of time to youth athletes and also to notice if there are any differences between the two age groups. Do older players think and feel differently than younger ones? Does mental skill training demand maturity? Are younger players able to execute mental skills successfully?

Results from the study suggested that younger players are able to use different mental skills effectively and successfully. Mental skills require the player’s willingness to learn before they become effective and player’s needs to understand its effectiveness before practicing the skills. Therefore, the player needs a certain level of maturity to understand all the aspects.

There were no significant differences in the results between the u16 team and the u20 team. U16 players felt easier to use self-talk in practice situation than the u20 team. Only 20% of u20 team agreed with the question when 70% of the U16 players shared this opinion. Same theme continued regarding executing mental imagery in practical situations, u16’s (85% overall agreement) felt it easier to use than the u20’s (60% agreement).

Results of self-talk benefits showed lot of similarity. Both age groups felt that self-talk is most beneficial when focusing performance and in skill learning. Also during practices players told that self-talk is easiest to aim to those two subjects.

Benefits of mental imagery had slight differences between age groups. Both teams felt that mental imagery has the greatest effect on skill learning. However, the opinion about the second best differentiated. In the u16 team the players felt that mental imagery affects second most learning the game situation while the u20 team players felt that mental imagery helps second most when focusing on performance.

Overall, players felt mostly the same way. Of course there are differences and study showed them rather well. Differences between age group were marginal and it is hard
to draw comprehensive conclusions based in this. One conclusion can be made based on the study however: in the age of 14-16 players are mostly able to use mental skills effectively and successfully. It can be suggested that it would be even desirable to begin psychological training in that age.
7 Discussion

The object of theoretical part was the give basic knowledge from the elements of mental skills that affect preparation. The object of study part was to see if mental skills can be easily taught in short amount of time and can players implement and benefit from them.

Nowadays it is crucially important to start mental training to ice hockey players already at the young age. Players can start learning with these simple training already when they are over 10 years old. In that case it would be automatic skill already at later age. Most of the technics that players were taught was easy to understand after few times players were able to get benefits out of them.

Players taught that mental imagery was easier to use during the practices and games. Reason for that might be that it is little bit more interesting technic for younger players. Players had some difficulties to find out right state of mind and make it work but after few repetitions they were able to succeed in it better. Our opinion is that mental imagery is more interesting way to enhance your performance but it needs more time and space than self-talk. It needs place or state of mind to get player totally out of the world that happens around him, that is why it is more difficult to use inside the game and practices. Before the performance it is very effective way. Mental imagery was find out to be useful in all parts that were pre-performance preparation, learning game situations, self confidence, focusing during performance but mostly it was founded to be useful in skill learning. Every third player taught that mental imagery helped them to learn new skills easier. I think that is very important result and it should give a question that why it is not already in use in younger players teams. One reason that young child have is great skill of imagination. What if 7 year old child would learn new skills with mental imagery? It would made learning a lot easier and it would give player a whole life lasting skill to learn new things always with mental imagery. That is one big thing that we should try to take out of this consider to use in action.

Self-talk was found little bit easier to use by players than mental imagery and theory agree with that. It is easier to use self-talk especially during game situations, in a hurry
and also in cozy places. Lot of players and athletes use self-talk mostly during performance. For ice hockey players it easy way to keep their concentration or calm their mind at the bench. Over every third of the players said that self-talk helped their to focus during performance.

What is learned by looking these answers is that both of the skills are good and easy way to start mental practicing and enhancing players performance. Mental skill is better way when player have more time before the games or practice and he is able to find peaceful place. Mental imagery also should be used in skill learning. Self-talk is best way to focus during performance. There is not a right, wrong or best way to do mental preparation. Best way is to combine these different technics and found out athletes own way.

Main reason to carry out this study was out of interest towards mental skills and also the fact that there were not many studies of the benefits of mental skills in ice hockey. Outcome of the project can be considered as a success. Theoretical part created some frustration, especially when attempting find relevant literature, but teaching and conducting the study was an enjoyable experience. Most of the players showed enthusiasm for learning and implementing the skills and also developed a lot during the process.

Having two different teams from different age groups and seeing if there are differences between them was extremely beneficial. Possible future implications for this project are numerous. It can be used as a guide for general mental skills learning and it also shows detailed information about what works with difference aged players and what doesn’t.

There is a large variety of mental skills and how to implement those. This study could have been done by using not just two different skills, but 10 different skills. Reason behind choosing self-talk and mental imagery came from previous personal knowledge and the feeling that these skills are the easiest to teach. Literature regarding self-talk was nearly non-existent and initially this set some challenges regarding finding suitable
theoretical base for the study. Mental imagery is more popular and had plenty of readily available literature. The idea was to write a compact theoretical part that contains the most important things what one needs to know before implementing these skills.

Mental skills are becoming more and more to the coaches’ and players’ knowledge, but the emphasis on it is not sufficient. It is a huge resource for an individual player, not just on ice, but as well in everyday life. If there are two players with similar skill level and one of them is mentally tough, he or she is more likely to excel. Mental skills affect all aspects of hockey: from winning and losing to rehabilitating injuries and returning on to the ice. Especially for a teenager, connecting ice hockey, school, friends and the opposite sex can be an extremely stressful situation.

To sum it all up: principles and practical applications of the most basic psychological skills and tools can be taught in a relative short period of time. It is always recommended that process continues through the season but the effects can be seen even with a short-term project such as this one. Youth players, 14-18 years old, are mostly mature enough to start mental skill training and the younger this form of training is started, the more likely player will be able to develop without mental crises.

In general, the project was an joyous endeavor which has definitely provided useful knowledge which can be applied to coaching as well as life skills of hopefully all the parties involved.
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38
9 Attachments

Attachment 1. Mental imagery teaching part

Mielikuvaharjoittelu
Vierumäki United
3/2015
Maso Lehtonen

Mielikuvaharjoittelu

› Mielikuvien muodostaminen helpottaa ja nopeuttaa oppimista, koska urheilijalla tulee olla oikea mielikuva suorituksesta, jos hän haluaa oppia uusia taitoja.
› Visualisoidessaan onnistuneita suorituksia ja hetkiä, pelaaja kohottaa itseluottamustaan.
Mielikuvaharjoittelulla voidaan vaikuttaa

- Itseluottamukseen
- Motivaatioon
- Keskittymiseen
- Tunteiden hallintaan
- Tehostaa teknikan harjoittamista
- Parantaa pelikäytystä
- Valmistautua kilpailuihin
- Keino työskennellä loukkaantumisten aikana
- Auttaa ongelmatilanteiden ratkaisemisessa

Mielikuvaharjoittelun

- Motivaatiota kehittäessa pelaaja kuvittelee itsensä onnistumassa suorituksessa
- Keskittymistä parannettaessa pelaaja kuvittelee mitä hän haluaa tehdä ja miten reagoi erilaisiin tilanteisiin
- Tunteiden hallintaa harjoittaessa pelaaja voi kuvitella valmiiksi miten reagoi erilaisiin tilanteisiin
- Teknisistä taitoja kehittäessä pelaaja käy päässään läpi suorituksen ennen sen tekemistä
- Pelikäytystä paransaessa pelaaja käy erilaisia pelitilanteita etukäteen läpi mielessään
Mielikuvaharjoittelu

- Otteluun valmistautuessa pelaaja käy läpi rutininsa, ympäristönsä ja pelisuorituksensa
- Loukkaantuneena otteluiden ja harjoitusten läpikäyminen kohottaa motivaatiota ja nopeuttaa pelikuntoon palautumista
- Suorituksen ongelmia ratkaistaessa urheilija käy läpi kriittiset pisteet ja sen jälkeen näkee itsensä onnistuvan niissä

Tehtävä(t) viikko1

- Kuvittele yksi pelitilanne mitä tuleet tekemaan harjoituksissa (Esim. Maalinteko, kiekon riisto, avaaminen, torjunta) etukäteen ennen jälle menoa.
- Kuvittele harjoituksissa tuleva suoritus etukäteen. (Esim. alkukierrossa kuvittele onnistunut suoritus etukäteen jonossa)
Tehtävä(t) viikko 2


Tehtävä(t) viikko 3

Ihmisen aivot tuottavat joka päivä noin 50 000 ajatusta.

Ajatukset seuraavat jääkiekkoilijaa myös harjoituksiin, oheisiin ja jäälle.

Harjoituksissa tapahtuvia ajatuksia on tarkoitus ohjata jaakiekkoon liittyviin ajatuksiin:
- Keskittyminen parantuu
- Oppiminen parantuu
- Epäonnistuminen nollaantuu nopeammin
- Voi johtaa yleisen suorittamisen kohomiseen.
Itsepuhelu

• Positiivisella itsepuhelulla ja ajatuksilla voi parantaa suoritusta, oppimista, käyttäytymistä ja tunteiden hallintaa

• Itsepuhelulla on positiivinen vaikutus itsetuntoon ja minäkuvaan

• Negatiivinen itsepuhelu ja negatiiviset ajatukset heikentävät yllä mainittuja asioita

Itsepuhelu

• Itsepuhelu voidaan jakaa kolmeen aiheeseen:
  1. Tekninen/taktinen
  2. Minäkuvaav vahvistava
  3. Mielivala sanat

• Itsepuhelu voi olla joko puhetta (kuuluvaa) tai ajatuksia (ei kuuluvaa)
Tekninen/taktinen

- Itsepuhelu sisältää yksittäisen tehtävän toteuttamiseen, ohjeistukseen ja yksilötaitoihin liittyviä sanoja
- Auttaa pelaajaa toteuttamisessa ja keskittymisessä harjoituksen läpi
- Helpottaa taidon oppimista
- Esimerkkejä: “Launo luistelusta”, “Syötä kovaa” tai “Luistele karvauksessa”

Minäkuvaavat vahvistava

- Minäkuvaavat vahvistava itsepuhelu sisältää minäkuvan kohottamiseen, itsetunnon nostamiseen ja kykenemisen tunteisiin liittyviä sanoja
- Auttaa pelaajaa vahvistamaan itseluottamusta ja kykenemisen tunnetta (osaamista, joukkueeseen kuulumista)
- Esimerkkejä: “Olen tärkea joukkeelle”, “Pystyn voittamaan vaikeat tilanteet” tai “olen hyvä pelaaja”
Mieliala sanat

- Sisältää tunteiden hallintaan, optimaaliseen suoritustunteeseen ja positiiviseen filikseen liittyviä sanoja

- Auttaa pelaajaa valmistautumaan suoritukseen ja löytämään oikean "peliliiksen"

- Auttaa lieventämään suorituksen edeltävää jännitystä ja hermostuneisuutta

- Esimerkkejä: "Rauhallisesti, ma oosaan tan", "NYT HERATYS, PELIPAIVA, ANNA KAIKKES JÄÄLLE!!!!!" tai "Huikaa päivä pelata kiekkoa"

Tehtävä(t) viikko 1

- Yritä tunnistaa negatiiviset ajatukset. Jos ja kun tunnistat negatiivisen ajatuksen, korvaa se positiivisella, vaikka se tuntuisi tyhjältä

Tehtävä(t) viikko 2

- Keksi itsellesi kaksi itseluottamustasi kohentavaa sanaa tai lausetta, jolla saat kohotettua itseluottamustasi. Käytä näitä lauseita päivittäin.

Tehtävä(t) viikko 3

- Rakenna itsellesi kolme lausetta
  - Lause joka antaa sinulle energiaa vääryneenä tai syttyttää sinut työskentelemaan kovemmin
  - Lause joka auttaa sinut nollaamaan epääonnistumisen
  - Lause joka auttaa sinua rauhoittumaan jos esim. suutut kaukalossan tai tunteeesi ottaa liikaa valtaa. Sama lause voi myös olla tilanteisiin jolloin jännität liikaa.
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49
**LOPPUKYSELY**
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3=Taidon oppimisessa</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4=Pelkästanteen oppimisessa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5=Ottelun valmistautumisessa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aion tulevaisuudessa käyttää mielikuvaharjoittelua</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aion tulevaisuudessa käyttää itsepuhelua</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uskon että mentaaliharjoitukset parantavat suorituksen</td>
<td>1</td>
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