

## **Developing the Practice Intensity Habit**

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Practice intensity is the will, commitment, and enthusiasm to practice with a purpose. Most coaches consider it an important characteristic of any successful team. The best players and teams have learned to get the most out of practices. They come to practice with an intense focus that directs them to enthusiastic, determined, goal-driven training. In youth sport very talented players often just ‘get by’ and are not intense in practice. They can cheat themselves for a while, but eventually others that practice with intensity catch up and pass them. ‘Going through the motions’ regularly in practice will stall your progress as an athlete. What you need to do is make practice intensity a habit. This column will explain practice intensity, highlight some possible causes, and help you develop ways of enhancing your practice intensity.

Intensity is not as simple as either you have it or you do not. Intensity must be viewed along a continuum where players can be over- or under-intensified. Thus, an appropriate level of intensity will lead to the best practices. Accordingly, sport psychologist Jim Taylor (1993) suggests that there are three important aspects of practice intensity including; (1) an ideal level of intensity is needed to play your best, (2) it is a positive feeling, and (3) the optimal level of practice intensity is different for all players. Let us now examine possible reasons for a lack of practice intensity.

Players that ‘go through the motions’ drive coaches insane. Why would players come to practice lacking intensity when it is obvious that good practices lead to good performances? Usually it is not intended. Instead, athletes that lack practice intensity may not be able to tell you the cause. Fortunately, research has provided some insights into this problem. Under-intensity often is the result of poor preparation, a lack of motivation, and fatigue. Moreover, under-intense players frequently lack goals or a plan for practice. Please reflect back to a practice when you were ‘going through the motions.’ Attempt to determine the reason(s) why you lack practice intensity.

Intensity level recognition is vital to focused practices. I often tell players to “check-in” with themselves right before practices or games to determine their level of intensity. Then we use an intensity meter to rate their level. A rating of 1 means that you are nearly asleep, and a 10 equals high intensity; maybe so intense that you are not focused on the appropriate things in practice. A log is a great way to track your intensity levels in practice. You can then determine after a couple of weeks what intensity level coincided with your best practices. An important note is that you should track your intensity for at least several weeks, otherwise you may get a “false reading” and not obtain the true optimal level of intensity.

Once you have determined your appropriate level of practice intensity, it is time to use several skills to increase practice intensity. You should think of these skills not just as strategies a player uses to increase intensity during practice, but as a way of consistent practice preparation. As mentioned earlier, players often lack intensity because they are not prepared. Developing a preparation plan before practices that include the following skills will help you eliminate ‘going through the motions.’ First, all good practices are goal-driven. Goals are achievement standards set to direct behavior (i.e., I will learn the forward crossover). Therefore, goals give us a clear purpose for practicing. It is amazing how many players go to practice without a goal. It is like driving a car without knowing the destination. Do not allow practice to be haphazard and lackadaisical. Set goals for improving skills, tactics, and techniques so that you will be on the

road of progress every single practice. Chart your goals daily and list whether or not you successfully achieved your goal.

The second skill an athlete should make a habit is using cue words, phrases, and images that refocus behavior. These skills will help you overcome a lack of motivation or fatigue. For instance, when you are lacking practice intensity you should use an invigorating cue or effort phrase of “come on, let’s get intense” to increase intensity. Or, use an image of a time when you were playing great, practicing hard, or had great intensity. Finally, many athletes will think of powerful images such as a rocket launching or a leopard sprinting to increase intensity. In conjunction with these cue words, phrases, and images players can begin to increase their own intensity by running in place with high knees or performing quick starts and stops.

‘Going through the motions’ in practice undermines your attempts to improve as an athlete. Setting goals and using cues and images are important to increasing intensity. To become your best you must make practice intensity a habit. Pushing your limits every single practice will enable you to improve skills and develop into a consistent peak performer.

Taylor, J. (1993). *The mental edge for tennis*. (4th ed.) Aurora, CO: Minutemen Press.