

Using Imagery to Enhance Performance in Powerlifting: A Review of Theory, Research, and Practice

Danielle M. Alexander, MA, Eric A. Hutt, MA, Jordan S. Lefebvre, MA, and Gordon A. Bloom, PhD
McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

ABSTRACT

IMAGERY IS A FREQUENTLY USED MENTAL PERFORMANCE SKILL THAT HAS BEEN ADVOCATED AS AN INVALUABLE TOOL BY ATHLETES, COACHES, AND SPORT PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSIONALS. AS SUCH, ATHLETES COMPETING IN POWERLIFTING CAN BENEFIT FROM THE USE OF IMAGERY TOWARD THE IMPROVEMENT OF INDIVIDUALIZED MENTAL AND PHYSICAL SKILLS. TO PROVIDE COACHES AND ATHLETES WITH A THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMAGERY-PERFORMANCE RELATIONSHIP; THIS ARTICLE (A) PROVIDES AN OVERVIEW OF THE PETTLEP MODEL, (B) REVIEWS THE BENEFITS OF IMAGERY ON BOTH THE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOSOCIAL OUTCOMES FOR POWERLIFTING ATHLETES, AND (C) PROVIDES RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICAL USE IN STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING CONTEXTS.

Address correspondence to Danielle M. Alexander, danielle.alexander2@mail.mcgill.ca.

INTRODUCTION

The sport of powerlifting has gained significant popularity since it received official designation as a sport by the American Athletic Union in 1964. Within this sport, powerlifting athletes strive to perform 3 different types of lifts: (a) the back squat, (b) the bench press, and (c) the deadlift, each with their own unique movement pattern and muscular execution. Given the high intensity, concentration, focus, and maximal effort required for each lift, the use of mental training techniques has the potential to enhance performance in this sport (3). Imagery, defined as mentally creating or recreating an experience in the mind using all of the senses, is a mental skill that is often used in sport (33). Imagery has been advocated as an invaluable tool by athletes, coaches, and sport psychology professionals (18). As such, it is reasonable to conclude that powerlifting athletes competing in this high-intensity sport can benefit from the use of imagery training toward the improvement of individualized mental and physical skills.

Sport psychology research has highlighted the positive association between imagery and performance enhancement in a number of sports, including swimming (20), basketball (22), volleyball (1), and weightlifting

(35). Specific to strength and conditioning contexts, imagery has been shown to benefit performance in a variety of motor, power, and strength tasks, demonstrated by improved technique and lift execution (7,17,35). In addition, the use of imagery has been shown to have a positive impact on important psychological variables related to successful performance, such as enhanced self-confidence and motivation (5,17), while also helping to control levels of anxiety and arousal (6,34). Despite the physical and psychological benefits of imagery use in sport, imagery continues to be underused by coaches, athletes, and trainers in powerlifting contexts (3,23). To provide coaches and athletes with a theoretical and practical understanding of the imagery-performance relationship, this article aims to (a) provide a brief overview of the established PETTLEP (physical, environment, task, timing, learning, emotion, and perspective) model, (b) review the benefits of imagery use on both the physical and psychosocial outcomes for powerlifting athletes, and (c)

KEY WORDS:

powerlifting; imagery; mental toughness