In a sports psychology practice clients frequently ask the question: Where is a proper or effective starting point to make a significant change in my life or to improve performance? In these kinds of questions you can detect a curiosity and search for a starting point or a foundation from which you can orientate yourself and explain the world around you. Perceptions can be the most profound starting point to introduce significant changes in your life. When you are working with perceptions, you are working with core mental adjustments that can change an individual’s universe in seconds and can lead to a total re-alignment of mental capacity. Staples underlines the power of perceptions by stating: ‘Individual perception is all-encompassing and all-powerful. How you perceive the world defines for you the environment you live in. It defines your hopes and your fears, and sets upper limits on your expectations in life.’

In essence the meaning of perceptions is the fact that every individual creates his own reality he lives in with his own perceptions of life. The implication for the athlete is that he/she can create his/her own performance-boosting perceptions as well as his/her performance-blocking perceptions.

Perceptions refer to the way the individual organises the information and sensations that he or she receives from the world. It also refers to the way in which an individual understands, interprets and assigns meaning to situations, a phenomenon, experiences, people and life in general. The neurolinguistic programming framework of human behaviour focuses heavily on the importance of perceptions. The concept of internal representations of the outside world refers to the mechanism of how perceptions operate. Hill summarises the essence of how perceptions actually operate in the following statement: ‘Our personal perceptions of “the world” or “reality” are the result of mental processing that depends on selective attention, sensory interpretation, and contamination or alteration by past experiences. These and other elements of sensation and perception shape and distort our internal representations of the outside world. Some of these distortions are advantageous and some harmful.’

Perceptions can be compared with the working mechanism of filters that allow us to filter only certain stimuli that can enter the mind and block out other stimuli. If we change perception, we also change the filter with which we look at the world.

Critical perceptions for optimal performance in sport

‘All our knowledge has its origins in our perceptions.’ – Leonardo da Vinci
‘There is no reality, only perceptions.’ – Phillip McCraw
‘The map is not the territory.’ – Alfred Korzbyski

B M J STEYN, D Ed, D Phil
Professor, Department of Biokinetics, Sport and Leisure Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria

Professor Steyn is registered at the HPCSA. He has qualifications in Sports Science (D Ed) and Psychology (D Phil). He has published many articles and delivered scientific papers both internationally and nationally at scientific congresses. He has prepared numerous national and international sport participants for international competitions.
Filter effect

The filter effect of perceptions can also be illustrated by the athlete's perception of the opponent. If the opponent is perceived as an enemy and opposition force, all the distracting information associated with the opponent as a performance block, an obstacle, an irritation and psyching-out force will be filtered into the mind. This perception and the negative information associated with the opponent will automatically block the athlete's opportunity to reach his goals. With this set of task-irrelevant cues and information, the chances of an optimal or reasonable performance are quite slim.

In contrast, a more constructive perception of the opponent will improve the athlete's chances of having a peak experience, when he/she perceives the opponent as a constructive force that can boost and facilitate performance. With this constructive perception of the opponent, all the task-facilitating cues such as:

- the better the opponent performs, the better the chances that he is going to get the best out of me,
- I need the opponent to compete, without him there is no competition,
- the opponent reminds me of my own unique style and unique strengths that I must focus on to compete with myself and to master myself in my sport, will filter into your mind.

The filter effect of perceptions can also be easily demonstrated by the following visual exercise. The first instruction is to look at all the black blocks in the picture and try to make sense from it. Give yourself one or two minutes.

The second instruction is not to look at the black blocks but rather look at the open spaces between the black blocks and see if you can find some meaning in it. More specifically, see if you can find a hidden word written in between the black blocks. You will find the word FLY written in between the black blocks. Now do the same with the second picture.

You will need far less time to find the word LET written by the open spaces in between the blocks. The reason for this rapid increase in speed is first of all the fact that you know exactly what you are looking for and, secondly, your perception of these kinds of pictures has changed instantly and forever. In the same way, other major perception shifts can change as quickly and permanently. Whenever you see one of these kinds of trick or illusion pictures, you will be able to filter the right and relevant information through to give it sense and meaning.

The most common performance-blocking and -boosting perceptions in sport are summarised in Table I. Remember that the spectrum of perceptions in sport is rich and multidimensional. Table I represents only a fraction of the spectrum of possible perceptions, namely the ones that are regularly encountered in sports psychological settings.

References
## Table I. Performance-blocking and performance-boosting perceptions in sport

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance-blocking perceptions</th>
<th>Performance-boosting perceptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competition is a threat:</strong> family, coach, selectors, spectators, critically evaluate me, I have to be perfect and I have zero defect tolerance where I have no room for mistakes in my performance.</td>
<td><strong>Competition is a challenge:</strong> wonderful opportunity to demonstrate ability and level of proficiency, ideal to risk and give my best, mistakes are used constructively as an investment experience and as a tool to intensify focus and performance.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stress is unpleasant</strong> and debilitating for my performance.</td>
<td><strong>Stress is pleasant</strong> and facilitates peak performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The opponent is an enemy and an opposition force that prevents me from reaching my goals and winning.</td>
<td>The opponent is a constructive force that will bring out the best in my own unique performance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Success equals winning and I only experience success when I beat the opponent with the least effort.</td>
<td><strong>Success is more than winning.</strong> I measure success when I improve in my mental, technical and strategic game, as well as my fitness level. The final success is to master myself in my sport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success can only be measured by the outcome. Winning is not the only thing, it is everything.</td>
<td><strong>Success is measured by the refining and constant improvement of the process of participation.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I see criticism as an unnecessary and painful experience and I usually take it personally.</td>
<td>I see criticism as a source of information and select only relevant criticism to work with. Ignore the irrelevant criticism and never take criticism personally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see setbacks and injuries as bad luck and unnecessary; they can only obstruct and prevent me from reaching my goals in my sport.</td>
<td>I see setbacks and injuries as a normal part of high-performance sport and believe that I can transform setbacks and injuries in a constructive way. Setbacks can provide the time to re-orientate in sport and can offer an opportunity to improve my mental toughness.</td>
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<td><strong>Success comes from the way others evaluate and see me.</strong> I have to keep my family, coach, and everyone else happy (other-referential). It is important to have the approval of others.</td>
<td><strong>Real success and satisfaction come from satisfying and pleasing myself in my sport (self-referential) and by keeping myself happy in my sport. If I am happy I can overflow and satisfy other people as a secondary by-product.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sport is very important for me.</strong> I invest so much time and effort in my sport and I experience a lot of pain if I lose. I cannot afford to lose or fail.</td>
<td><strong>Sport is a bad master but a good servant.</strong> I always want to stay the boss and the master of my life. Sport is one of the many places where I can discover and enjoy myself.</td>
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