

# Olympics: Mind games of the victorious

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## *Otago Daily Times:*

For decades after the first sports psychology lab was established in 1920 in Germany, mental coaches have been the water boys of sports science, viewed by their colleagues as not quite good enough to make the first-string team.

That has changed. Virtually every top professional team and elite athlete has a psychologist on speed dial for help conquering the yips – when stress makes crucial muscles jerk and ruins, say, an archery shot – marshal the power of visualization, or just muster the confidence that can mean the difference between medaling or just muddling through.

But a more important reason for the improved reputation of sports psychology is the solid science demonstrating the effect of the mental game on athletic performance.

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But the power of the mind is sufficiently great that it can even trump reality.

Scientists have known since the 1990s that athletes who look at a target without moving their eyes have better success making soccer penalty kicks, basketball free throws, golf putts and other challenges where aim is crucial. But why does “quiet eye,” as it’s called, help?

One idea was that by keeping the gaze fixed on the target the athlete could better ignore distractions. But scientists led by Purdue University’s Jessica Witt, a psychology professor and 2005 Ultimate Frisbee team gold medalist, had a different hunch. They asked whether quiet eye changes how a target looks: objects seen in the center of the eye, called the fovea, appear larger than those seen in peripheral vision. Could that improve aim?

Read the whole story: [Otago Daily Times](#)