

See the big picture:  
Improving peripheral vision

By Dr. Fred Edmunds

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How many times have you heard your coach say, "Keep your eye on the ball (puck, track, etc.)."

Well, he's right - in most instances.

There are, however, situations during the game that this may not be the best advice, particularly when you have to avoid something and you need to react fast. In those cases, it's your peripheral vision that gets you out of trouble and directs your reaction.

In most dynamic team sports; lacrosse, hockey, football, soccer, basketball, you must have excellent peripheral vision to excel (AND stay on your feet and healthy).

Peripheral vision, also commonly referred to as peripheral awareness, is an experiential, or learned visual skill. That's why your parents probably have better peripheral vision than you. They've been around longer in this big world of ours.

Remember when you and your little brother were fighting in the back seat of the car on the way to grandma's for Christmas? You wondered how your dad saw you pull the arm off of Timmy's Batman action figure. Peripheral vision. Last week, during your hockey game, you were checked hard and ended up on your butt and you never saw it coming. Poor peripheral awareness. You get the picture.

Young athletes tend to be very centrally focused when they play their sport. While this is fine for golf, tennis, or even baseball (unless you're charging down a fly ball in center-left field), they miss a lot of what 's happening around them on the field of play. Their 'field sense' is poor. They may miss an opportunity to make an assist, lose possession of the ball or puck, or even get taken out of the play.

Fortunately, peripheral awareness is a visual skill that can be readily improved with training. How can we increase our peripheral vision and compensate for our habitual central focus? Hi-tech equipment is available to train and exercise peripheral awareness and there are many different tactics sports vision specialists use to help athletes become more aware and improve their 'field sense'.

Here's a few things that you can do on your own:

Step #1 - Open field drills. During practice or training, look for opportunities to use the open field and challenge your lateral vision and blind spots.

Effective drills include open field running with the football or soccer ball, dribbling the basketball on an open court, or skating with the puck on open ice. Challenge yourself to notice objects or players to the side of your vision as you move.

Step # 2 - Wide angle view. Get out, into the big wide world and seek out panoramic views - like Rochester's skyline from Cobb's Hill Park or as you're driving south on 390. While looking straight ahead, become aware of all the activity in the periphery. Challenge yourself to identify things or landmarks to the side of your vision.

Step #3 - Look at things differently. Get your eyes off objects; don't look directly at them. Look to one side of the object, then the other. Look above, then below. See how much detail you can pick up with your peripheral vision. Now, next time you visit grandma and dad's driving, you'll know when you can get away with bouncing that lacrosse ball off Timmy's head (oh, and you'll see the check coming and move out of the way).

- 'Dr. Fred' is an optometrist specializing in sports vision. He has worked with Olympic and professional athletes all over the globe to improve their visual performance. He recently opened the XTREMESIGHT Performance Clinic at the ESL Sports Centre on the campus of Monroe Community College in Rochester.