

Tool to enhance athletes' reactions is eye-opener

By Jim Gintonio
The Arizona Republic

For years, Dr. Jeff Eger, an optometrist, was nagged by a question:

"Do athletes think too much?" he asked himself recently for about the millionth time.

"You see," he said, "I think that dumb means smart. My motto is KISS, which means 'keep it simple, stupid.'"

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you think.

After years of tinkering, he came up with a machine that measures an athlete's response time, but he needed a coach willing to let him test his theories.

Enter Coach Argie Rhymes and the talented Carl Hayden boys basketball team,

which is making a run for the Class 5A state championship. The Falcons have seen the light for years, but Rhymes figured Eger's device could give them a little edge, so he gave Eger the green light to work with a few of his players.

The eight-light contraption, patent pending, is called the EZ Eye. The athlete stands in front of it, and the lights flash randomly in a number of positions for 10 cycles. The object is to tap the light the instant it flashes. Reacting rapidly ideally translates into quicker, non-thinking actions on the basketball court.

The Falcon with the quickest reaction time is 6-foot-10 John Smith III, whose father is a former Harlem Globetrotter. Skeptics might say it's in the genes; this kid "should" be quick.

But that's not the case, Smith said.

"This has helped me a lot," Smith said. "When I read, for example, I can concentrate

and read without head movement.

"On the basketball court, I use my eyes more and don't have to move my head. You want peripheral vision."

Keeping his head from bobbing has an added benefit. "It helps my jump shot," Smith said.

Smith, who averages 15 points, eight rebounds and five blocked shots, is a key to the Falcons' success. Carl Hayden (22-3) hosts Tempe Corona del Sol (18-10) in a first-round playoff game Wednesday.

Smith has been working with Eger for six years. His eye conditioning on more conventional machines has served him well.

"I've been going to Dr. Eger three times a week," he said. "I don't need reading glasses anymore."

He can punch out the light cycle in 1 minute, 55 seconds, almost two minutes faster than his first attempt. That's the best on the team, but Eger said the biggest success

story could be Jerome Brown, who lost the sight in his right eye as a toddler when it was punctured by a coil.

"I'm totally blind in that eye, but I'm used to it," said Brown, who is averaging about 10 points and 10 rebounds. His play doesn't reflect his lack of vision; it's more like he has eyes in the back of his head.

"In his mind's eye, he can see as well as anyone," Eger said. "We know he's a terrific player, and he's become more peripheral."

Brown just smiled at the compliments and said he always has been able to react. But Smith said he has noticed a difference in his teammate.

"I think he's more relaxed out there," he said.

Eger has made a case study of Smith.

"Every time John uses the machine, he teaches me something about reaction," Eger said. "He can react and feel and not think too much."

Results of Test Marketing of E.Z. Eye Trainer
of the 4 players on Carl Hayden High School
2 Became First Team All State
Wayne Rhymes + Jerome Brown (one seeing
Carl Hayden High School, 1997 Won 5A State Championship!
Arizona 5A Champions