

Being In the Zone

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In the flow, in a groove, on a roll, in the zone - whatever you call it, it's all defining one thing. It's that special feeling of thinking you can do no wrong and everything goes your way. You are so involved in what you are doing that nothing else seems to matter because you are so connected to your task. When former Boston Celtic star Bill Russell characterizes being in the zone he says it is, a moment when everything goes so perfectly that you slip into a gear that you didn't even know was there (Greider, 1991, p. 17). Unfortunately, this doesn't seem to happen enough of the time. In fact, every time it does happen, it is usually by chance; you took no real active part in it. It just happened to be a day when everything fell into place, clicked for you, and you got a taste of what it's like to be in the zone. It's kind of like getting a taste of the good life. Hopefully this occurrence will motivate you to do everything you can to have more peak performances.

By implementing mental training skills you can increase the chances of this transpiring on a more consistent basis. The Japanese call it satori - the magical state where you're completely focused on the task at hand, relaxed and mentally clear (Albinson & Bull, 1990). Being in the zone means doing more than anyone else thought possible, even superseding your own expectations at times. This zone is the definitive reason why many people are motivated to participate in sports.

Take a few minutes and think about a time when you were in the zone. As an athlete, it's the time when everything came together for you - it was exactly the kind of performance that you'd like to repeat over and over again. When I was competing as a skater, there was a parent in the rink who said it best. During practice, after a flawless routine she would say, That's the one you want to put in your pocket and take with you to every competition. She summed it up perfectly! But, what exactly did that routine encompass that was so magical?

Characteristics of being IN THE ZONE

1. Relaxed: The days of getting psyched up are over. Research has shown over and over that the best performances occur when you are just slightly above your normal state of arousal, not at the extreme end of the spectrum as once thought. You are energized, yet relaxed - it's a subtle balance of quiet intensity. Your mind is calm and your body is ready to go. You feel relaxed, but you are able to move with great strength and ease.
2. Confident: Not letting a lapse in performance undermine your belief in your overall abilities is at the core of this characteristic. When you are doing well, you feel confident that no matter what you are up against, you are going to come out on top. You just exude with confidence and pride, and it is evident in your performance. There is no fear. You should expect to be successful, not hope or wish to be successful. You must adopt a confident, winning attitude. It is trusting your instincts and intuition to do the right thing at the right time; and if you are prepared, you can be confident that this will happen. This complete faith allows you to just know that you are going to do everything necessary to be successful without the conscious use of reasoning or analyzing.
3. Completely focused: You are totally absorbed in the moment. You have no memory of the past and no qualms about the future; you are here now. The only thing you are concentrating on is the task at hand. You are oblivious to everything else going on around you - consumed by the moment. Like a child playing with his or her toys, you are so absorbed in the moment that nothing outside can effect you. You have no real sense of time. The event seems to have flown by, and at the same time, everything you did seemed to happen in a slowed-down pace with great precision and concentration. Having the ability to stay in the moment is a gift that all of peak performers have. Recently, I was working with a Division I Collegiate Women's Volleyball team and they were describing a match they had played a few days earlier. One of the girls mentioned that once she stepped out onto the court, she didn't hear or see anything that wasn't game-related and that she had tunnel vision ; the player next to her said, you were in the zone.
4. Effortless: Things just sort of happen with little or no effort whatsoever. All your moves are smooth and for that time, running seems like the easiest thing in the world. You are in a state where you can accomplish great things with little effort. Your mind and body are working with one another in perfect unison. The grace and ease that you display

make everything you do seem like the simplest task in the world. You have a sense of finesse and grace, even when the task is very grueling and demanding. That sort of connectedness and moment of greatness is an awesome thing to both witness and take part in.

5. Automatic: There is no interference from your thoughts or emotions. Things are just happening, both without protest and without consent. You are on auto pilot - just reacting to whatever comes your way. Your body just seems to know what to do without any directive from you. There is no conscious thought involved; you're going strictly on your instincts. If you think less, you will achieve more.

6. Fun: When you're in the flow, the enjoyment is incomparable to anything else. Anyone can see in your eyes the satisfaction and fulfillment the sport gives you. You feel like your sport is giving you back something that you can't get from anyone or anything else. This is a key factor because if you don't enjoy your sport, your future in it will be limited. 7. In Control: You feel that no matter what, you are in control. What you think and want to happen will. You have ultimate command over your emotions as well - you are controlling them, not the other way around. When you are in control, you are in charge. You govern your own destiny. When you feel this strong of a command, great things are sure to happen. The authority is yours, and no one else's.

Chungliang Al Huang states, Sport is a whole brain and body activity. To be good in sport requires the presence and participation of your mind, body and spirit in total synchronization (Huang & Lynch, 1992, p. xxi). This is worth restating - your mind, body and spirit have to be working together to be successful. And, this usually encompasses the characteristics that we just talked about. After looking at these, if you go back to the time when you were in the flow, I'm sure you will be able to put a check next to some of the qualities mentioned above. You can then see where you are and what you are striving for - which is ultimately, to be a peak performer in your sport.

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