



the extra gear

Mental Toughness Training for Peak Sport Performance

9601 Gayton Rd. | Suite 206 | Richmond, VA 23238 | 804-754-THE X

Self-Awareness of Peak Performance States

Introduction

Many athletes can recall a time during training or a competition in which they felt “in the zone,” like they could do no wrong, like everything was easy and automatic. Frequently, these same athletes can recall a time close to this performance when they felt just the opposite; that is, they felt unmotivated, lethargic, bored, fatigued and like everything was difficult. What accounts for these differences? It is unreasonable to think that fitness level or technical skills changed in such a short period of time. It is more likely that mental factors account for these performance differences. The closer athletes get to their ideal mental state for peak performance, the more likely it is that their sports performance will improve.

Does Your Mental State Relate To Your Performance?

To begin to understand how your mental state is related to your sport performance, try this exercise: Recall one of you best performances. Take five minutes to imagine this time as vividly as possible. Try to recall the energy level, anxiety level, physical tension, direction and breadth of your attentional focus, self-talk, degree of confidence, and so forth that you had during this best performance. After you have a clear idea of what your mental state was during this performance, complete the “Self-Awareness Rating Scales” of the *Two-Minute Journal*.

Next, recall one of your worst performances. Again, take five minutes to imagine this as vividly as you can. Try to recall your energy level, anxiety level, physical tension, direction and breadth of your attentional focus, self-talk, degree of confidence, and so forth during this worst performance. After you have a clear idea of what your mental state was during this performance, complete the “Self-Awareness Rating Scales” of the *Two-Minute Journal*.

Compare your responses between these two performances. The ratings that have the largest differences will give you clues as to the most important factors for you to focus on in determining your peak mental state. This, in turn, will help you decide what mental skills should be focused on first. In this way, increasing self-awareness is the key to self-control.

A Zone For Every Athlete...

Although the characteristics of this “zone” vary from person to person, research done by Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi indicate that many athletes describe a similar subjective state when they have a peak performance. This state, called “flow” is thought to be the psychological precursor of the mental state required for peak performance. That is, while not all athletes experiencing flow have a peak performance, it may be that all athletes having a peak performance are in flow. There are typically nine characteristics of flow that have been described:

- Challenge-skills balance – feeling you are being challenged but you have the skills to succeed
- Action and awareness merging – a feeling of being “one” with your actions
- Clear goals – a well-defined idea of what you need to do to succeed
- Unambiguous feedback – you know clearly how you are doing and what you need to do
- Total concentration – complete focus only on the task at hand
- Total control – a sense of being able to do anything without feeling like you have to try
- Lack of self-consciousness – no worries, concerns, fear of failure or self-doubt
- Time distortion – a feeling that time speeds up or, more often, slows down
- The “autotelic” experience – the experience was so enjoyable it was its own reward

Of these nine characteristics, the merging of action and awareness, total concentration, total control and the autotelic experience are the ones most salient by athletes who experience flow. Notice that these characteristics imply the use of several different mental training skills – e.g., concentration, goal-setting, thought control and motivation.

...And For Every Athlete, A Zone

The work on flow has attempted to identify the characteristics experienced by all athletes during peak performances; another line of research has taken an individualized approach. The idea is that everyone has an ideal performance state, but the characteristics of this zone differ from one athlete to the next. The trick is to find out what level of what characteristics puts you in your “IZOF,” that is, you “Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning.” This research, led by Yuri Hanin and his colleagues, focuses on the emotional states of athletes and their relation to sport performance. Specifically, the IZOF model requires athletes to rate the intensity with which they experience a set of positive and negative emotions during different performances and determine the emotions that have the most impact on their performances. These emotions are categorized into four different types:

- Helpful-Positive Emotions (P+) – emotions that are experienced as positive and aid sport performance (e.g., energetic, confident, motivated)
- Helpful-Negative Emotions (N+) – emotions that are experienced as negative and aid sport performance (e.g., angry, fierce, jittery)
- Harmful-Positive Emotions (P-) – emotions that are experienced as positive but hurt sport performance (e.g., quite, contented, lighthearted)
- Harmful Negative Emotions (N-) – emotions that are experienced as negative but hurt sport performance (e.g., afraid, depressed, lazy)

Although the process of constructing an IZOF is rather involved, the main idea here is that by gaining greater self-awareness into your ideal performance state is the first step in self-regulation, which is the ultimate goal of mental skills training.

To Think Or Not to Think

Many athletes report that when they feel in the zone they aren't aware of having any conscious thoughts. After all, some of the most notable characteristics of flow have to do with the merging of action and awareness and of effortlessness. Consequently, some athletes are reluctant to think about how they are feeling and what they are thinking while they perform. They are afraid that thinking about it too much will ruin the experience.

It's true that one can get too caught up in thoughts, and instead of being a vehicle towards self-awareness, they become a distraction. To avoid this "paralysis by analysis" it is important to recognize when you are functioning optimally and when you are not. Strive to "check in" with yourself periodically to assess your physical and mental state. If you are doing well, there is no need to think anymore; just keep doing what you're doing. If, on the other hand, your performance state is less than optimal (which is the more common state of affairs), then further scrutiny can help you determine what is off kilter, and what needs to be done about it.

A useful strategy for this "checking in" process is Ravizza and Hanson's "Traffic Light analogy." A traffic signal has three lights: A green light demands no attention; you simply keep on driving without thinking about it. A yellow light demands that you observe the situation in more detail and determine what, if any, action needs to take place. A red light demands that you stop immediately. As you drive, you need to periodically check the traffic lights to see what you need to do next. Similarly, athletes need to periodically check their mental state to see what (if anything) they need to do to perform better. If they give themselves the green light, there is no need to think about what they are doing, they just need to continue doing it. If they give themselves a yellow light, they need to determine if they need to take some action, like relaxing more, or changing their self-talk. If they give themselves a red light, they must take more drastic action or they will need to stop.

Make "checking in" a B.A.S.I.C. skill

When you're training hard or competing it's difficult to remember what conditions you need to focus on during these "check-ins," especially in the beginning. To help you remember what to check, as well as to remind yourself that these check-ins are a "BASIC" mental skills technique, use the word "basic" as a mnemonic device. Each letter stands for a condition you need to check:

- B – Body. Check your technique, posture, and muscle tension.
- A – Arousal. Check your anxiety and energy level.
- S – Self-Talk. Check what + or – things you are saying to yourself.
- I – Imagery. Check what sort of imagery you are using.
- C – Concentration. Check how focused you are on your ride.

Begin practicing these BASIC check-ins during your easy training days, like your active recovery days, when the intensity of the efforts will not require your total focus. Once you become more accustomed to checking in, try using them in harder training efforts, then in simulated competitions, and finally, when checking in becomes automatic, try them in your competitions.

Keeping A Sports Journal

There are several ways to help you improve your self-awareness of peak performance states. One of the best ways is to keep a sport journal. Keeping a sport journal provides a structured way to catalog your thoughts and feelings during training and competition and thereby increase your self-awareness of your peak performance states. Using one will increase your awareness of the association between various mental states and athletic performance. In addition, after learning mental skills training techniques to control your mental state, you can use the journal to assess the effectiveness of these techniques.

Ideally, a sport journal should be easy to use. There is only one good type of journal – the one that gets used. *The Two-Minute Journal* was designed to be easy to use, quantifiable and to reflect the most up to date scientific understanding of mental skills training. As its name implies, it was also designed to complete quickly – literally in two minutes.

If you prefer, however, you can create your own journal. If you do, I recommend that you include a variety of information to describe your performance, your associated mental states, and any intervention strategies designed to control these mental states. Consider including the following information:

- Date
- Type of activity (training or competition)
- Goal(s) for the activity
- Stress level and distractedness
- Current mood (e.g., on a 1 – 10 scale of poor to great)
- Level of motivation before activity
- Pre-activity heart rate (optional, but a good physiological measure of arousal)
- Thoughts and feelings before, during and after the activity
- Mental skills strategies employed and their perceived effectiveness
- Performance rating (how well you think you did in your physical performance)
- Ideas/comments/observations (e.g., what you have learned from this, what to do next time)

Save Yourself Some Time

A major challenge to incorporating mental skills into a training regime is to find that time to do it. One of the best and easiest ways to increase your self-awareness in a time-efficient way is to become more mindful of your physical and mental state *during* your training sessions. This way, you can increase your self-awareness without adding much time to your training. For example, consider doing the following:

- Use your warm-up time to focus on your physical and mental state.
- Use cross-training days to pay attention to your thoughts, feelings, muscle tension, breathing, and so forth.
- Use the time when you stretch after training to focus on the physical sensations of your muscles and the quieting of your mind and body.
- Pay special attention to the physical sensations you have during drills, interval work, and so forth.
- During rest periods between higher intensity interval training, close your eyes and take an inventory of your physical and mental state (get a partner or ride a stationary bike, trainer, etc.).

For more information on goal-setting and other mental skills techniques to improve sport performance, contact sport psychologist Dana Blackmer, Ph.D. at Dana@TheExtraGear.com or visit The Extra Gear online at www.TheExtraGear.com.