

## **Mind Fitness & Sports**

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On the homepage of the American Sports Institute it says:  
"Sports is an art, a humanity, a science that brings forth the human spirit. In so doing, sports plays a vital role in the evolutionary development of humankind toward a higher state of consciousness.... The human spirit comes forth when a commitment is made to a common vision that transcends the self and is pursued with passion."  
-- www.amersports.org

Sports, music, and dance are all integral disciplines that blend physical and mind fitness. These somatic disciplines, grounded in our physical performance can each offer an introduction to disciplines of mental fitness and meditation training. Each of these activities demands that we be fully present in what we are doing, yet at the same time maintain a suppleness and flow with the moment to moment changes of the process. The mental and physical discipline of sports or the performing arts trains the mind to access a wide range of concentrative and meditative states. The exhilaration of these activities is not just due to physical demands, but is also related to the naturally blissful, energized, creative, and peaceful experience of the quiet and concentrated mind.

Once we have successfully harnessed our wandering thoughts, new dimensions of awareness open up. Momentary peak experiences of being in the "flow state" with its effortless and extraordinary performance are quite common to athletes and artists. These moments of grace seem to happen spontaneously and are seldom understood or replicable, yet their memory lingers . . . and our standards for what we *know* is possible may never be the same again.

The numerous examples of flow state or peak performance experiences reported by athletes and sports teams—though described by "jocks" rather than bearded sages—are strikingly similar to classical concentrative and meditative experiences.

Certainly not all of us have to dedicate our life to our sport, rather we can dedicate our sport to our life—approaching our training as a vehicle for honing those human qualities that enhance virtually all of the endeavors we set our minds to. There are countless men and women who have discovered or learned how to calm their minds through breath control, to transmute anger and fear into power, to let go as well as to hold on, to be sensitive and

caring rather than callous. By learning to blend with inner and outer natural laws, many athletes have been able to tap reservoirs of extraordinary power, skill, and understanding, allowing them to perform in remarkable ways.

*Sports training through its physical actions, activates those human sources that develop an athlete's personality, improve physical and psychological skills, and discover unlimited possibilities of the human mind and body .Performance is only a means to facilitate the athlete's self-actualization, to help athletes create in hard work, indisputable cultural values of modern humanity.*

—Tadeuz Rychta

The arena of athletic competition provides a laboratory in which mind-body skills can be tested and refined. Though the motivation may be different, the commitment and rigorous discipline of modern athletes is closely akin to practitioners of inner contemplative traditions. When faced with an equal in competition, one is forced to draw upon resources that are ordinarily considered to be beyond the range of one's capabilities. The orchestration of mental factors necessary to reach for this domain of extraordinary performance has catapulted many individuals and teams into realms of experience that are ordinarily the territory of yogis, mystics, and contemplatives.

The recent trend in physical fitness has raised and deepened the awareness of many people. This has resulted in a second wave of interest that incorporates the conscious cultivation of mental fitness skills in conjunction with the practice of athletic and martial arts disciplines. On the field or on the mat, one receives moment to moment feedback on the interrelationship of mind and body. With practice one learns to minimize those mental and physical states that decrease and impair one's effectiveness, and to increase those that enhance one's performance.

Let us look at some examples of how these extraordinary states of mind can be developed and expressed in the arena of our life. The dynamic state of personal excellence in action has been studied in contemporary psychology at the University of Chicago by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who has studied a broad range of intrinsically rewarding activities, all of which are marked by a similar experience, that he calls "the flow." The key elements of the flow are:

- 1 The merging of action and awareness in sustained, nondistractible concentration on the task at hand.
- 2 The focusing of attention on a limited field of stimuli.
- 3 Self-forgetfulness with heightened awareness of function and body states related to the involving activity.
- 4 Skills adequate to meet the environmental demand.
- 5 Clarity regarding situation cues and appropriate responses.

Flow states arise when there is an optimal correspondence between one's capability and the demands of the moment. The spectrum of the flow experience is bordered on the one hand by anxiety inducing situations where demands exceed one's capability and on the other by boredom where one's capability far exceeds the demand.

A person in flow operates from a unified perspective. Their attention is completely absorbed into the activity without any dualistic sense of an "I" who is doing something. The moment this awareness is split and one becomes self-conscious, the flow state is interrupted.

*There are moments of glory that go beyond the human expectation, beyond the physical and emotional ability of the individual. Something unexplainable takes over and breathes life into the known life. One stands on the threshold of miracles that one cannot create voluntarily. The power of the moment adds up to certain amount of religion in the performance. Call it a state of grace, or an act of faith... or an act of God. It is there, and the impossible becomes possible... The athlete goes beyond herself; she transcends the natural. She touches a piece of heaven and becomes the recipient of power from an unknown source.*

*The power goes beyond that which can defined as physical or mental. The performance almost becomes a holy place-where a spiritual awakening seems to take place. The individual becomes swept up in the action around her-she almost floats through the performance, drawing on forces she has never previously been aware of.*

-- Patsy Neal, basketball player

A neurophysical interpretation of the significant characteristics of the flow state reveals that it requires both precision and fluidity in neurologic patterning, so that the brain can change in dynamic response to the fluctuating situational requirements. The flow state is not a static pattern of ongoing arousal, rather it demands flexibility. The chronically anxious or habitually aroused individual is likely to confront more situations where their internal state is inappropriately tuned to environmental demands and thus unable to access a flow state. Changing circumstances require changing internal states.

There are two ways of increasing the likelihood of flow experience: regulating environmental challenge to fit one's skills, as in games, or self-regulation of internal capacities to meet a greater variation in external demands. The disadvantage of the first is that flow remains situation bound, relying on a given set of environmental cues for its elicitation. mental fitness disciplines such as relaxation, concentration, meditation, biofeedback, hemisynchronous brain states, and martial arts would fulfill the latter strategy of producing a shift in internal state. Learning such skills maximizes the possibility for us to

enter the flow state, while lessening the need to control the environment. Moreover, these approaches teach how to use a variety of self-tuning technologies that alter the basic process of mind, so that situations can be met from a flow state more frequently.

Epstein has recently suggested that one of the most rewarding aspects of long distance running is what some have called the runner's high. She described it as "drifting" . . . formerly known as "dreaming your life away." Epstein states:

*The standard by which I measure my run is not the degree to which I sweat or how fast a pace I set. It is not important to me whether I beat my own record or surpass my friends. Just give me a quiet, pleasant area to run and let me drift.*

Epstein also noted that the evaluation of her runs was based on the amount of drifting she has been able to accomplish. It was acceptable occasionally to focus on some unusual or interesting sight, but speedy return to the state of drift was paramount.

One of the most celebrated descriptions of an experiential immersion in flow was given by ex-San Francisco quarterback John Brodie. In an interview with Michael Murphy, founder of Esalen Institute, Brodie described this extraordinary way of perceiving space and time:

*Often in the heat and excitement of a game, a player's perception and coordination will improve dramatically. At times, and with increasing frequency now, I experience a kind of clarity that I've never seen adequately described in a football story. Sometimes, for example, time seems to slow way down in an uncanny way, as if everyone were moving in slow motion. It seems as if I have all the time in the world to watch the receivers run their patterns, and yet I know the defensive line is coming at me just as fast as ever. I know perfectly well how hard and fast those guys are coming and yet the whole thing seems like a movie or a dance in slow motion. It's beautiful.*

Descriptions by athletes of such events are abundant. These are common and are not purely the exclusive domain of the professional athlete. The time defying total absorption of the backyard athlete or the runner's high of the professional marathon may be similar in origin. These experiences suggest that an alternative to the ordinary means of experiencing space and time lies within us all. Our challenge is to understand the mechanisms of these experiences and help people learn to consciously evoke these experiences rather than unconsciously stumble into them.

Lester Fehmi describes this state as “an unobstructed flowing of energy and experience through the mind-body system.” He designed a method he called “open focus training” that works with spatial awareness and objectless imagery to decrease ordinary self-consciousness and the awareness of time and space. This state of integration he calls “no-time.” He concludes that the way we attend affects all waking activity. Research on open focus and similar meditation techniques confirms that the disposition of attention, more than any other process of behavior that one can learn to control, directly governs one’s state of mental and physiological well-being.

Explanation of the synchronous entrainment of a team is usually nebulous and vague. Yet theologian Michael Novak suggests that precise and coherent reorganization of individual and team resonance is demonstrated by these moments of team excellence.

*When a collection of individuals first jells as a team, and truly begins to react as a five-headed or eleven-headed unit rather than as an aggregate of five or eleven individuals, you can almost hear the click; a new kind of reality comes into existence at a new level of human development. A basketball team, for example, can click into and out of this reality many times during the same game; and each player, as well as the coach and the fans can detect the difference . . . for those who have participated in a team that has known the click of camaraderie, the experience is unforgettable, like that of having attained, for a while at least, a higher level of existence; existence as it ought to be.*

With diligent practice and unwavering commitment, these extraordinary states of personal and team excellence can become the norm and not the fleeting exception. In an article entitled “The Liberal Arts and the Martial Arts” that appeared in the *New York Times*, Donald Levine described the stages of development that lead to the pinnacles of performance.

*One begins by self-consciously practicing a certain technique. One proceeds slowly, deliberately, reflectively; but one keeps on practicing until the technique becomes internalized and one is no longer self-conscious when executing it. After a set of techniques has been thoroughly internalized, one begins to grasp the principles behind them. And finally, when one has understood and internalized the basic principles, one no longer responds mechanically to a given attack, but begins to use the art creatively and in a manner whereby one’s individual style and insights can find expression.*

The fast-paced, colorful, and demanding nature of sports initially captures the interest of many people interested in testing the potential of their mind and body. With continued training, many athletes learn to equally value training time in the quiet depths of the mind as a domain of free play, self-healing, and regeneration, and as a source of strength and power to access new dimensions of performance. The continued melding of mental and physical technologies will empower athletes and teams of the future with the skills to far surpass the performance norms of today. With this contemporary approach to mental fitness training the best of both modern and ancient disciplines will be blended, enabling us to continually expand our understanding of what is possible for a human being or a team to accomplish. The following inspiration from Morehei Uyeshiba, the founder of the martial art of aikido offers a glimpse of a mind that has made a perfect blend between mind fitness, meditation, spiritual development, and the physical training and testing ground we call sports:

*The secret of Aikido is to harmonize ourselves with the movement of the universe and bring ourselves into accord with the universe itself. He who has gained the secret of Aikido has the universe in himself and can say, " I am the universe." I am never defeated, however fast the enemy may attack...When an enemy tries to fight with him, the universe itself, he has to break the harmony of the universe. Hence at the moment he has the mind to fight with me, he is already defeated.*

*Winning means winning over the mind of discord in yourself... Then how can you straighten your warped mind, purify your heart, and be harmonized with the activities of all things in nature? You should first make God's heart yours. This is a Great Love Omnipresent in all quarters and in all times of the universe. There is no discord in love. There is no enemy of Love.*