

Sports Performance and the Mind

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Most athletes work extremely hard training their bodies to perform at its peak level of endurance. They condition their bodies with stamina workouts, build strength through fitness conditioning and perform workout routines that maximize "muscle memory" in order to compete at a high level. Most of the training takes place in a gym, fitness facility or in specialized training environments.

The average athlete, from the "weekend warrior" to the high school "jock," from the seasoned professional to the collegiate playing on a scholarship, spends an enormous amount of time focusing his attention on his body. In fact, the athlete's body will receive the bulk of his attention during his entire sporting career. Is there not more to maximizing one's performance than just making the physical body stronger and faster? How often does an athlete actually undertake the training of his mind?

A championship athlete will have a mind that is as well-tuned as his body. He spends time visualizing the outcome of his performance. He releases negative thoughts and self-defeating images of sabotage. He is well aware of locker room distractions and off-the-field gossip and does not let those hindrances enter into his focused vision of success. He values the power of the mind to either create success or to sabotage his performance. Just like hiring a staff of personal trainers to condition his body, someone who understands the potential of the mind often hires professionals to keep his mind sharp as well. The mind plays a vital role in how successful an athlete will ultimately become.

It is easy to witness an athlete's mind that is either focused or well-established in sabotage. For instance, an all-star professional basketball player struggles to sink a "free throw" throughout his entire playing career. Despite the best shooting coaches in the business, the many hours of practice time working on his technique and the most uplifting support from coaches and fellow teammates, this professional is still not able to increase his free throw percentage.

It is not always about the technique or the amount of practice time put in that matters most. It is all in one's mind and the willingness to either focus on success or sabotage one's success. While many sports analyzers and radio talk show hosts wish to blame the coaches or the player's lack of effort, these are rarely the true issues. This blame mentality makes for good talk radio but seldom uncovers the truth in a story. This particular player in actuality does not want to make this "free" basket. He is deliberately sabotaging his own success because he is not aware of the power of his own mind and thoughts.

A basketball player who is dominant by nature with size and strength might have established a "rule" in his head that he must dominate others in order to score points. The act of domination gives him the thrill to continue to succeed. He uses his physical strength and speed to conquer his opponent and show him who is on top. He feels that he must "earn" each point that he scores. For a basketball player like this to receive a "free" point might seem "unmanly." He cannot justify this act in his mind. He might judge others as weak or lazy for receiving points they did not earn. A free point is seen as something that was not earned and he continues to unconsciously miss the shot. In most cases, he has not examined these deep core beliefs and continues to struggle at the free throw line.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the basketball player who seldom misses a "free throw." In his mind he has rehearsed this momentary pause in the game over and over until the thought of success is the only one that enters his mind. He is able to tune out the loud roar of hostile fans screaming obscenities at him and waving menacing white towels. The only thought he can see through his focused vision is that of the basketball traveling smoothly through the net. While this player might spend time practicing his technique, the real secret to his success is in his mind. It is his repetitive positive thinking that has ensured his success. Technique is important; positive focused thought is even more important. You can either visualize yourself being successful or visualize yourself failing. Wherever your mind travels to will create your outcome for you.

In another example of the power of the mind to create success or sabotage occurs as a championship golfer loses his form and his winning ways. He is on the top of his game, winning championship after championship. The rest of the field of players has a sense of fear and submission around him. They all realize how focused and dominant he can be.

In an instant this championship golfer is involved in a scandal. Not only does his personal life turn to shambles but his golf game deteriorates tremendously. His winning ways are over as he begins to look "mortal." Once again, the sports analyzers will often blame his recent knee surgeries or the fact that his stroke is "off." Some even wish to blame the fact that this golfer has been experimenting with a variety of new golf clubs.

The reality is far simpler than a maladjusted golf swing or a recent surgery. This player has dropped into the world of sabotage and deep within the inner workings of his mind he is deliberately failing. He is creating his own lack of success. He might be punishing himself for creating a scandal and hurting others. He might be punishing himself for getting caught in his scandal, rationalizing, "How careless was I? I should have been more crafty than that?" He might be self-flogging himself for disappointing his mother, who up until that time had held her son in high regard. Whatever the case, the punishment is self-imposed and when he feels like he has punished himself enough, he will regain his focus and his winning ways. When do we stop blaming golf clubs or sore knees when our success or failure frequently lies in the power of our own minds?

Imagine the story of a star high school football player who suddenly develops back pain. He is debilitated and unable to play. On closer examination you begin to witness the real story being played out in his head. He is such a good athlete that the

coaches are requiring him to play several different positions that he is in conflict with. While he nods and says "Yes" on the outside, his mental and emotional reality on the inside is saying "No." His mind is saying, "I am going to sabotage my performance because I am not being allowed to play the position that I want to play." A player who is forced to play a position that he does not resonate with will often (unconsciously) try to sabotage his game through an injury or poor performance.

A baseball player might suddenly lose his swing. He cannot hit if you lobbed cantaloupes at him. It turns out that he is in the last year of his current contract. The team management has informed him that they will not pay him any more money than he is already receiving. He is experiencing an internal conflict because he believes that he is worth more money than he is being offered. While it may look like his swing is off, the reality is that his mind is sabotaging his success by not wanting to perform at his best for the team. By unconsciously performing poorly he is saying to team management that he is demanding to be traded at season's end.

We see over and over how the mind controls the outcome of an athlete's performance. For instance, an athlete is having marital problems at home and his on the field performance suffers. He is unfocused on the game at hand and begins to worry or create negative thinking about the sport he loves. A pole vaulter is able to clear nineteen-feet in practice but is not able to do so in a contest. He is resisting allowing himself the accolades of a champion. A professional golfer might be able to drive the golf ball a very long distance but he cannot putt very well at all. His mind might be saying that he is at peace with being a strong and powerful "driver of golf balls" but he is also saying that the game of putting short distances is not that important to him. He might have made a rule in his head that only "sissy" men putt well.

The difference between a great athlete and a mediocre athlete is that the great athlete "expects" to win each contest while the mediocre athlete "hopes" to win. Expectation is the mind at work carving your future pathway. A great athlete in the contest of basketball expects each shot to go in the basket, no matter how many defenders are hanging from him. A mediocre athlete will throw up a shot and hope that it is "lucky" enough to go in. If you believe that it takes hard work to become a champion then you are correct. If you believe that it is easy to become a champion then you are also correct. The hardest working and the hardest training individuals do not always win the most championships.

The team with the most talent does not always win either. Expectation leads to championships as much as raw talent. How often do we see the collaboration of some of the best players in a sport come together on the same team and create a "super team." These super teams are not always successful. Often you have locker room tension, drama played out in the media and internal strife. While the sheer talent is there, the "chemistry" is not. Teams that are the most successful have one "alpha" or dominant leader. The rest of the team focuses their thoughts behind the leadership of this one player. When more than one alpha are present, the focus is split among players. We see mental doubt arise in the minds of many players as roles are not clearly defined.

We often wish a team member "good luck" before competing in a sporting event. Luck has little to do with the outcome of the event. We should be sending them optimism to stay positively focused on a desirable outcome no matter what direction the match seems to be turning. We childishly believe that by wishing someone luck they will be bestowed with a magical potion that takes them over and creates a world of success. "Luck" is seen as something outside our control and handed out like hall passes in junior high school. We are often told that our success is not our doing but we need this external magical potion to be successful. The "luck factor" is like blaming the stars for the failure of your love life or blaming the economy for your poor business decisions. You are still seeking something outside of yourself to set the blame on.

We often place a strong emphasis on "home court advantage." This is a concept only for the untrained mind that is relying on the external for a sense of security. The trained mind can direct a body to win anywhere because a player's focused internal thoughts will guide him. The external stimulation of the applause or the shaming of the exuberant fans does not affect him. He is instead responding to his positive inner dialog. An unfocused player will have his moods change in response to the external cues. A "home" crowd will lift him up and a "visiting" hostile crowd will cause him to shrink.

Imagine if you could record the thoughts going through your head as you lean over and attempt a short putt in golf or a forehand slam in tennis. Imagine if there was a megaphone that went from your brain to the outside world, proclaiming to an admiring audience what exactly it is that you are thinking about as you are engaged in your particular sport. Would the audience be surprised to hear the mind's reality of "I hope I don't miss" coming from your inner thoughts? What might it be like to be consciously aware of the thoughts going through your head while you were participating in a sport? The reality is that you can!

We often hear the expression that an athlete will "choke" when he fails to meet his critic's expectations. "Choking" is really an athlete's way of manifesting a negative thought pattern around his performance. He now is actively engaged in finding a way to sabotage his success. Instead of visualizing a positive outcome he now has shifted his mind chatter to dialog with a negative thought pattern. He might believe that if he wins the contest someone else will have to lose. That particular belief might cause him conflict. He might not be ready to handle the pressure of being on top and the ultimate champion. Always hungering for something that you desire keeps you pursuing it. Once you get to the top where do you go from there?

Consciousness begins off the court or the field of play. One cannot begin to learn about consciousness while in the heat of battle. Just as the physical training for a contest goes in before the match and not during the match, the mental training also happens well before taking the field of play. There has evolved over the last few decades the field of *sports psychology*. This specialized realm has brought forth consciousness within the athletic terrain. Many professional sports teams have on occasion used sports psychologists to enhance their players' potential.

There are many more avenues in which to train the mind to think positively and eliminate negative thought patterns while engaging in athletic pursuits. A method that many have found helpful is to work personally with a practitioner of

"applied kinesiology" who specializes in sports enhancement. This type of body/mind treatment entails asking the body/mind many different questions that peel away the layers of sabotage. For instance, a belief that to be successful might make one feel ashamed (for instance because a sibling is not enjoying the same level of success), might cause one to sabotage his success. These deeply rooted beliefs cannot be detected on the surface. Only by probing into the subconscious can you clear and remove the negative thought patterns that lead to a variety of sabotage issues. Applied kinesiology is one of the many tools to make this happen.

An applied kinesiologist might work with a baseball player to focus his eye-hand coordination to perfect his swing. Perhaps the baseball player has a fear of hitting a ball directly back at the pitcher and causing the pitcher harm. Hence, the batter holds back and diminishes his swing. The kinesiologist can clear old memories of when this athlete felt the most powerful and believed that he had hurt others in the process. Once cleared, he is free to remain in his full power and perform at a higher level.

A golfer might have a resistance to making a short putt. He pressures himself to such a degree that his focus is off. He focuses more on the negative thoughts of "I hope I don't miss this" rather than expecting to see the ball roll into the cup. He is still recreating an old memory pattern, perhaps from many years before. He might be playing an old "shame tape" in his head where he does not believe that he deserves to win. Believing that he does not deserve to win helps to create a lack of focus.

There is nothing that a skilled professional in applied kinesiology or other body/mind techniques cannot do to enhance a player's game. Using the training and the insight of a professional is a very important step in cleaning up the mind game.

Imagine if positive thinking began in grade school and parents made it important to learn these techniques themselves and guided their children away from their violent world of video games and into the world of positive creation. Imagine a world where youth soccer coaches and little league baseball coaches spent just as much time on positive visualization as they did on teaching more physical training techniques. Imagine if it were common for high school sports teams to have a mind coach on staff alongside a strength and conditioning coach. Just imagine the peak performances of college and professional athletes as they spent just as much time on preparing their minds as they currently do training their bodies.

The power of the mind and of positive thought cannot be overstated. While strength and conditioning programs are important in an athlete's development, learning to focus and tune up the mind will take one from mediocrity into greatness.

For many years it was thought impossible to run a mile distance in under four-minutes. In May, 1954 Roger Bannister finally broke through this imaginary wall of limitations and ran a mile in under four-minutes. By the end of the year in 1957, sixteen runners had also surpassed the four-minute mile mark.

(http://www.sptimes.com/News/121799/Sports/Bannister_stuns_world.shtml). Once Bannister set the stage, it was now "known" to be possible to run a mile under four-minutes. Training and diet had not changed; expectations however, had changed.

What might you imagine was going on in the mind of Kobe Bryant when he scored eighty-one points in a professional basketball game on January 22, 2006? No

matter how many defenders were draped over him, the ball still managed to go through the net over and over again. If you asked Bryant, he probably would tell you that he was "in the zone." When we are "in the zone" we are in a place of complete allowing with little or no resistance. There is no fear. There is no worry. There is only positive attraction. How many athletes would deeply wish to find this mindset every time they went out to compete?

An athlete who offers no resistance is often very intuitive and competes "inside out." He might have a "sixth sense" about what is going to happen next or where the play is going. He senses momentum shifts, understands team morale and patterns of behavior. His mind is working as much as his body.

There is no doubt that physical training of the body is an important step in the success of an athlete or a team. However, just conditioning the body and improving one's technique is not a guarantee of success. The mind plays a pivotal role in how successful a player is and how successful a team becomes. The weakest link in the team will be the player who is unfocused and will end up dropping a ball at a crucial moment or will cause the team to stumble.

What might the performance of athletes be like if they were to give importance to the mind and spent just as much time in mental preparation as in physical conditioning? Is it not time to stop practicing harder and start practicing smarter?

Resources

Golf in the Kingdom, Michael Murphy

Zen Golf: Mastering the Mental Game, Joseph Parent

Unconscious Putting: Dave Stockton's Guide to Unlocking Your Signature Stroke, Matthew Rudy

The Inner Game of Golf, W. Timothy Gallwey

The Inner Game of Tennis, W. Timothy Gallwey

Applied Kinesiology: A Training Manual and Reference Book of Basic Principles and Practices, Robert Frost

Applied Kinesiology: Muscle Response in Diagnosis, Therapy, and Preventive Medicine (Thorson's Inside Health Series) Tom Valentine, Carole Valentine and Douglas P. Hetrick D.C.

Wooden on Leadership: How to Create a Winning Organization, John Wooden and Steve Jamison

The Gold Standard: Building a World-Class Team, Mike Krzyzewski and Jamie K. Spatola

Health Dynamics- Costa Mesa, California Dr. Kristie McCoy, chiropractic kinesiologist with a specialty in sports performance enhancement (<http://www.healthdynamicscenter.com/>)

Jon Burras is a body/mind therapist, yoga therapist and intuitive connective tissue bodyworker. His recent book, *Return to Nature: The Five Pillars of Healing* is now available at JonBurras.com or Amazon.com.

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