

Getting in “The Zone”

By Dr. Rick Van Haveren

John had a great day on the tennis court. He was feeling great, and all his shots seemed to go in. When he served, the service box seemed huge and he felt he couldn't miss. Although at times his opponent played well, he knew he couldn't be beaten. The ball moved in slow motion, and John was able to see things before they happened. The match went by rather quickly, and when John came off the court he found himself thinking, “Time really does fly when you're having fun.”

Have you ever had that experience? In sport psychology, John's experience is called being in “the zone.” This is also sometimes called “peak performance” or a newer term is the concept of “flow.” The zone is a psychological state. Being in a state of peak performance not only applies to sports, but can also apply to other aspects of life such as musical performance and work.

Professional basketball player Randy Foye recently made a career best eight 3-point shots, including five consecutive, a franchise-record. Foye said, “It feels like your body is numb. You are just out there in your own little world. Once you touch the ball and get an open look, it's like throwing a rock in the ocean.” That's right, Randy, a rock in the ocean.

So how do you get in the zone? Do the stars need to align a certain way? Does it help if your opponent is really bad? Often times when I talk with clients I'll ask what is going on mentally and emotionally when they are at their best and at their worst. Clients often start with what it's like when things are not going well. They say they experience self-doubt, over-thinking, hesitation and fear. When I ask about what's happening mentally when things are going well, people often pause and then say, “I'm not really thinking about anything; things just happen automatically.”

Research suggests there are several psychological characteristics associated with peak performance or being in the zone, and I want to highlight a few. The first is not having any fear. When we become afraid, our body can experience a physiological response. This can include an increase in heart rate, muscle tension and changes in blood flow—all of which can adversely impact your play. Tennis players can trigger this response by interpreting events in a fearful or anxious way. What do you fear? Losing? Being defeated by a rival? Double faulting on match point? When we think in fearful, anxious ways our body responds, and thus, we can't get in the zone.

In tennis, there is no real fear. In other sports, such as gymnastics or motocross, there are elements of the sport that are fear-inducing. Keep in mind that fear on the tennis court is a choice and a creation of our own thinking.

A second characteristic of peak performance is a lack of cognitive analysis about performance. What does this mean? Basically, it means letting things happen and not over-thinking. What happens when you are having a bad day on the court? Some players start practicing their form between games; others sit on the bench and wonder why they are not playing well.

In general, players start analyzing why things are going wrong and what they need to do to play better. While this makes sense, keep in mind that when athletes are in the zone, there is no analysis of performance. Instead, they are immersed in the moment and are letting things happen; they don't think, they just do. It's hard to be in the zone when your mind is over-thinking. If you need a reminder, just remember Randy and his rock in the ocean.

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