

The Way of Zen Performance Enhancement

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Working with elite athletes and implementing various techniques to keep athletes focused and at their optimal performance for a sustained period of time includes incorporating various meditation techniques that counterbalance their sport-specific physical and mental demands, which is an important element of success throughout the years.

This concept is just beginning to make its way into the sports medicine arena academically as more articles are coming out supporting the effectiveness of meditation and recognizing there is a phenomenon that happens with athletes influencing athletic performance. Terms originally coined dealing with this concept within sports medicine are reversal theory, in the zone, flow, competitive fire and mental toughness, which described an attempt to academically provide quantifiable data of the characteristics and dynamics associated with athletes and their experiences.

There have been various attempts to explain this universal phenomenon experiencing total concentration and involvement, control, a unity of mind and body and a sense of personal fulfillment at an optimal level of performance. This quest started in the mid-seventies and only in the last five to seven years is meditation beginning to be actively implemented with athletes as part of their training. Still in its infancy, it is starting to be written about in the literature and talked about in the athletic training rooms as part of the athletic program.

Some individual athletes have been implementing this for years. However, this was not part of the athletes training regimen with the predominant focus on the physical component of individualized power, strength, neuromotor control (speed, coordination and agility) and strategy. The level of the athlete will determine the level of movement activities that can be used for training and sport specific practice. The higher the level of athlete, the more integrated stimulus needs to be applied integrating proprioceptive, multidirectional movement and cognitive components simultaneously. The problem is that the cognitive skills only received practice through the competitive endeavor, the pinnacle of performance which translated to the competitive moments rather than part of the daily practice.

What is described has been an integral element of many martial arts; experiencing higher levels of consciousness (focus), intent and sustained performance on a continual level. This is not only common it is an accepted part of the process.

The Zen moving into the sports medicine arena has been utilized by individual athletes probably since the dawning of athletic performance and competition. However, the significance is that this has not been apart mindset within training athletes for sports in the Western culture.

Brief Historical Journey

Research articles addressing the curiosity of the heightened awareness and focused ability of athletes first started to appear in the early 1960s, but it was not until the late 1970s to the mid-1980s that more researchers got on board. With more recognition this then flourished through

the 1990s, as more sports psychologists investigated this "universal phenomenon."

In 1990, Csikszentmihalyi coined the term "flow" that articulated what athletes experience in a variety of sports and at all levels of sport as the characteristics and dynamics of being in this zone. Ultimately, the term coined that took flight was "in the zone" which came to be the buzz word for the ability of the athlete to be completely focused and in the moment which this research supports. Within academics, the terms "in the zone" transitioned to "flow" then "the zone" but all defining an athlete that is mentally completely "immersed" and focused in the present moment without distractions when performing, totally trusting individual skills and abilities and react with no worries of the outcome, no fear or doubt about the results.

Transition

The concept of mind-body has flourished in the past decade more poignantly in the past seven years with the acceptance of holistic perspectives involving complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), wellness, integrated medicine and integral medicine. Actually, this is not new as many have promoted this mind-body-spirit belief since the "new age" movement.

Moving into the 1980's, research done by Dennison's work in educational kinesiology showing both brain hemispheres working equally through movement by patterning the brain to function as an integrated whole (both brain hemispheres). This created better neural communication between brain hemispheres, having increased capabilities to process information more completely and efficiently through whole brain learning.

This is identified with athletes (movements) because they cross the mid-line of their body on a regular basis which activates neural patterning in both brain hemispheres - right/left hemisphere brain integration. To further this dialogue, much research done in the field of meditation provides interesting neurophysiological functions associated with brain hemisphere functioning equally while monks meditated. Our culture tends to be mostly left brain-oriented academically and through our lifestyles, this is where athletes have an advantage due to right/left hemisphere brain integration through sport (movement). The bottom line in all of this is that the information deals only with physiological and biochemical functions, not consciousness and intent as part of the process.

The Zen moving into sports medicine meditation is seen as "new" within this field by implementing it with athletes either before or after training depending upon the beliefs and philosophy of the sports medicine director of a team and/or certified athletic trainer dealing with college athletes. Yoga has gained momentum over the past decade with more individuals and athletes being exposed to different implementations of "exercise" and "stretching" although this narrow perspective is changing and the realization that there is much more to yoga and meditation beside stress management.

Of course, many authors have introduced some form of meditation, deeply seated within Eastern philosophy, to athletes and non-athletes alike. Csikszentmihalyi associated this perspective with the "feeling of being moved down a river by the current, this positive groove" and he believed this also applied to music, work, spiritually, education and life. He identified a self-surpassing dimension of human experience that is recognized by people the world over, regardless of culture, gender, race or nationality. Its characteristics include deep concentration, highly efficient performance, emotional buoyancy, a heightened sense of mastery, a lack of self-consciousness and self-transcendence.

This was proposed decades ago yet has only recently in its infancy being implemented as part of

the college athletic programs. The possibilities are endless not only within medicine, but performance enhancement for athletes and non-athletes alike. It is a higher state of consciousness - clarity. Sports have fueled the fire with extraordinary abilities at elite levels that surpass and perplex scientists. This started as these concepts were filtering into the universities as individualized classes of wellness, yoga, meditation, Tai Qi, Qi Gong and stress reduction. Individuals pursuing these interests and talking about it in the athletic training rooms and even some of the athletic trainers and coaches experiencing or practicing some of these methods on their own to understand and know the benefits.

The Zen of Performance Enhancement

Ironically, most of what was described is exactly what many martial artists experience. Martial arts intentionally cultivates this inner ability and higher level of consciousness (focus) to tap into, as well as develop power, speed, agility and self-confidence. In much more advanced levels of martial arts, the ability of knowing what the next move of the opponent is going to be before it happens is commonly accepted as part of the training regime, along with the intent to cultivate *Qi*.

This concept is centuries old and sports medicine, over the span of almost 40 years, is cultivating a classification and description to acknowledge the process in achieving this sustained state of being. In sports, we focus on the physical endeavor and very little attention to developing our inner selves which allows us to handle very stressful situations in a calm and neutral manner like sports competition.

The first step is creating dialogue from professional athletes to individual experiential knowledge. The next step is to be like Nike and "Just Do It," as athletes have done. The third step is implementing this concept within traditional academics and sports programs.

The fourth step then becomes accepting this concept as an equally viable part of training. Non-athletes are driving change and this transition due to the exposure of this information through many authors that have written about meditation. The fifth step and beyond is being consistent with the practice of choice and delving deeper into who you are.

In this journey, it is important to accept where you are at any given moment. Acknowledge, honor and respect where you are and let it go. The Western culture likes distractions. We have an ability to refine, change and cultivate training athletes and non-athletes alike that addresses sustained performance enhancement that many Eastern practices have known and implemented for centuries. Eastern medical systems and philosophies articulate very logically and profoundly that nature and humans are in a dynamic harmonious rhythm and all are inter-related.

Meditation and Individual Potential

The idea is to provide a means to get past whatever is holding us back either athletically, personally or professionally. All of us are at different levels and seeking how to refine and move past some form of blockage that inhibits us from achieving individual optimal performance. Things like lack of focus, high expectations, self-doubt or low confidence, intimidation, worrying about what others think, fear in general, fear of failure, lack of intensity, perfectionism of course there are so many more labels that hold of back. By taking a "time out," you can start to provide some form of clarity.

The longer this is implemented on a continual basis, the more depth is gained on an individual journey of self-discovery. No one can implement this form of training for you. Whether practicing beginning yoga, Tai Qi, Qi Gong, meditation, three deep breaths, a short walk or more advanced

techniques, all will provide numerous ways to "cultivate" this state of clarity that promotes being present in the moment, not worried about what others think, say or the outcomes of the particular event.

This can be a bit more refined by implementing a meditative form/technique that would be opposite of the individuals/athletes daily routine or sport. For example, weight lifters and most anaerobic sports are very Yang in nature. One recommendation would be a more Yin nature style of meditation or yoga, coloring mandalas, Tai Qi, Qi Gong, sitting or lying down meditation, etc.

For almost 40 years, sports psychologists have pursued this venture of cultivating a classification and description to acknowledge the process in achieving this sustained state of being of athletes during competition. In sports, we focus on the physical endeavor and very little attention is paid to developing our inner selves which allows us to handle very stressful situations in a calm and neutral manner associated with sports competition. Ultimately, providing a viable training method to cultivate and achieve balance between the mind-body-spirit in sports performance and promote a sustained period of optimal performance by increasing individual consciousness through meditation is the goal.

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