

Finding The Flow

Excerpts from an article by Melanie McQuaid

Many athletes have felt themselves fall under a trance or experience a level of focus where nothing but the act of racing enters their mind while performing. In this state of flow, the body can actualize the training that's been absorbed without interruption by distracting thoughts or extraneous actions.

Minimizing thoughts to action items leaves no time for reflection and thus no distracting thoughts about the outcome. Thoughts that are poisonous to performance are thoughts that reflect on the race outcome before it's over...

Focusing on positive, constructive thoughts and immediate needs allows one to maintain distraction control... To "suffer" well, turn all the sensations of pain into positive reinforcement that a great performance is underway.

In the end, attitude is a big determinant of outcome. The more an athlete loves competing the better that athlete will perform. There is a choice in attitude just as there is a choice in how one prepares for a race. Hearing that an athlete was having "the time of their life" or having "so much fun" often goes along with a performance that would be described as "in the zone."

Flow, a feeling of being carried by a current of water, of invincibility, of unshakeable focus and of effortless performance is a term coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his 1990 book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Csikszentmihalyi was fascinated by artists who became so lost in their work that they would neglect sleep, food and water for hours or days at a time. In his research he developed this theory of flow and found it applied it to many facets of life including sports, work, education, music and spirituality.

Csikszentmihalyi and his fellow researchers identified the nine factors necessary to experience flow:

1. Challenge-skills balance

Where there is confidence that skills meet the task at hand.

2. Action-awareness merging

The state of being completely absorbed in an activity, with tunnel vision that shuts out everything else.

3. Clear goals

When one knows exactly what is required and what one desires to accomplish.

4. Unambiguous feedback

Constant, real-time feedback that allows adjustment of tactics to adapt (for example, splits in a race or relative placing during the event).

5. Concentration

Completely blocking all distraction with laser-beam focus.

6. Sense of control

When one feels that actions can affect the outcome of the challenge.

7. Loss of self-consciousness

When one is not constantly self-aware of success during the event.

8. Transformation of time

One loses track of time due to total focus on the moment.

9. Autotelic experience

When one feels internally driven to succeed even without outside rewards (doing it "because you love it").