

Sport Psychology

The Inner Gymnast

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TV sportscasters love to talk about "The Zone," that mysterious place top gymnasts go while they're performing amazing feats. It's not really that much of a mystery, though; we've all been there. For most of us, it probably happened while we were driving. When we suddenly snapped to, we realized that for the previous five, 10, or 15 minutes, we'd been driving, but our mind had been totally engrossed with something else. Could we get there again at will? And can gymnasts do the same? The answer is probably, if we have a coach showing us the way.



The zone is an altered state of mind and body that gymnasts reach just before and during their top performances. You have been in the zone when you have had the in-depth discussions with friends, or when taking an evening stroll or drive when time disappeared. You were in the zone then. Or maybe you've been listening to music or reading a really good book and been totally absorbed. That, too, counts as a visit to the zone. We all have been there but peak performing gymnasts dwell there.

This is where the coach fits in. If he or she can create an atmosphere that will help their gymnasts find the zone, the rewards can be enormous: your gymnasts might be perfect on the beam, stick bar routines, or score a perfect 10 on the vault. The coach can be the postman for the zone.



It's an easy job in some cases. Diver Greg Louganis, who in the 1988 Olympics was able to come back and enter the zone to win his gold medal after he hit his head on the diving board, overcame a realistic fear that an errant dive could possibly cost him his life. Heisman trophy running back Tony Dorsett said he knew where defenders were when he ran the football without even seeing them. Somehow his feet knew where defenders were and ran away from them. Superbowl MVP Joe Montana would get so deeply into the zone that he would literally forget what play was called two and three downs previous. The coach simply stays out of the way in these cases. Whatever it takes to get into the zone,

in these cases the athlete has it.

But for every athlete like that, there are dozens of others who struggle to get to their zone on a consistent basis. The very best thing a coach can do to help those players is to find out exactly what the zone is and how peak performers get there. I did, though it took years of trying through observation and interviewing peak performers, and plenty of frustrating dead ends. I started with the idea that only top gymnasts could find the zone. It must be some special place, I surmised, found through their physical training and the fact that they are performers. I had it backwards. Athletes first find the zone, then find peak performances.

If you ever had a chance to ask a gymnast after an incredible performance what they were thinking I guarantee they answered it with one word. "NOTHING." "My mind was blank." "It was like something was instructing me other than my mind." "Whatever that something was I just released myself to it."

Finding the Zone

For the peak performing gymnasts, finding the zone first requires relaxing every part of the body. Most people seldom experience this state, because their thoughts, especially the judgmental ones, get in the way. For some, it might be the thought that they're too slow, uncoordinated, or weak. Others might start thinking about that bit of criticism their coach threw at them earlier in the day. These thoughts have GOT to go, or the zone will be impossible to find. Here's a hint: Instruct the athlete to sit quietly, in a quiet place, and listen to his or her breathing. Just sit and learn to enter a calm state and allow the mind to go quiet. It is the ability to create a quiet mind that allows one to go into the zone. The mind that is blank can perform in the zone: just sit, listen to their breathing and "blank" their mind. That is all.

Only after they have calmed down and are starting to slip into a "blank mind" state, can they see themselves performing on the field, in an optimal way, with the mind completely focused on what they are doing. No judgmental thoughts, just performing. The gymnast's body knows where to go without being told. The body will go on flow and the mind on automatic pilot. The body, in the visualization knows where to run, when to jump, how to perform on the beam. Performance is perfect.

Some gymnasts may find an increased awareness and an ability to flow with the visualization. They will be able to blank their mind of any thoughts and perform as in a dream. They have found the zone. Others may struggle. Some gymnasts may be too "hyped-up." This is an area that the accomplished gymnasts are aware of. The art of gymnastics demands the gymnasts be



able to alter their arousal level. For example the vault requires the gymnast to "psych-up" to perform well. The gymnast needs to self-talk to get the blood flowing. Self statements like: "Here we go," "Lets do it," "All we got," are thoughts that can pump up the gymnast. Also, more aggressive breathing can help.

Conversely, the beam requires the gymnast to bring arousal level way down. Falls are often attributed to athletes being too high and unfocused. The same technique is successful. Self-talk statements like: "Focus," "One step at a time," "Quiet mind," are all effective. Slowing and making the breathing deeper is another technique that is effective in lowering arousal for this event. Practicing these techniques with visualization as well as doing them "in vivo" during the meet will greatly assist the gymnast.

Manufacturing The Zone

Obviously a coach cannot get all their gymnasts into the zone every time. If that occurred the team would win every meet. We all know that doesn't happen. But we can place the gymnasts in position to enter the zone as opposed to working against it happening. We can allow the gymnasts to develop mental training habits to help produce this zone state. We, as champion coaches, can train ourselves to be disciplined in our interactions with athletes to increase the probability of this occurring. If we do these things the zone will not occur in our gymnasts in every meet, but it will occur more frequently.

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