

Optimal Experience in Sports

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Writing 50

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November 25, 2009

Abstract

This paper discusses what contributes to true happiness in collegiate athletics. Happiness, or optimal experience, is equally composed of peak performance, flow, and being part of a team. A survey was conducted in order to relate these three ideas to each other and to optimal experience. A total of 52 UCSB athletes participated; at least one athlete from every team, except golf, took part in the survey. The components of flow I chose to focus on include goals and feedback and skill-requiring challenge. Furthermore, the importance of how emotions affect an athlete will be explored. Sport psychologists previously studied anxiety as a negative emotion, however this paper will discuss the positive as well as the detrimental aspects. The “putting the team first” mindset and the effects of this mentality on the athlete’s happiness are also examined. Using the data from the surveys, this paper will analyze how the three aspects—peak performance, flow, and being part of a team—relate to an athlete’s optimal experience.

Optimal Experience in Sports

What is happiness? It seems like such a simple question, and yet, when asked to define it, people provide a variety of answers. The definition that most intrigued me is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's explanation of optimal experience as true happiness. Being a former competitive basketball player, I was able to relate to the states of mind he described. Loss of self-consciousness and alteration of time perception are two of the components of flow that are ubiquitous in a sports competition. As I became progressively more interested in the topic, I began contemplating the actual significance of flow to an athlete's happiness. While it is indeed a primary component of enjoying the game, I thought about other components that could also lead to an optimal experience in sports. In an article in *The Sport Psychologist*, Lazarus (2000) asserts that an athlete's happiness may depend less on flow and more on overall morale and consistently high levels of motivation (p. 248). These contradictions of what causes true happiness in athletics led me to this question: How are peak performance, flow, and being part of a team related to each other and to the optimal experience of an athlete?

Background

The study of emotions, peak performance, and optimal experience in sports psychology is still a relatively unexplored field. The idea of emotions affecting performance is not new; most early studies focused on anxiety and the negative effects it had (Hanin, 1997, p.58). Yuri Hanin's research with elite athletes and his development of Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) is one of the primary studies that initiated popular interest in the ways emotions negatively and positively impact performance in athletics. The article mentioned before by Dr.

Lazarus, “How Emotions Influence Performance in Competitive Sports,” was inspired by Hanin’s works. Lazarus reassessed the list of emotions Hanin researched and applied his own interpretations. For example, Lazarus argues that Hanin’s list of “emotions” contained some ideas that were motive/attitude based (ex: lazy) or moods (ex: calm, nice, pleasant); while these ideas were related to emotions, Lazarus chose to focus on more concrete emotions (ex. anger, happiness, etc.) (p. 239).

Emotions, negative or positive, have the potential to influence an athlete’s performance and disrupt or promote flow. Lazarus (2000) asserts that coping with emotions, as well as receiving appraisal, is essential to the athlete’s peak performance (p.233). While I addressed anger, guilt, pride, and relief in my study, I focused more on anxiety and happiness. Anxiety can be beneficial or detrimental to peak performance. This emotion is often generated when the individual is being evaluated or when the outcome of the event may be influenced by sources outside of the individual’s control (Lazarus, 2000, p. 244). Anxiety, however, can also enhance the individual’s performance. Bunker (1985) observes “In general, it has been found that for each and every sport or skill, an individual needs to be aroused to a level above his or her normal, resting state, but not too high” (p. 151). Lazarus (2000) acknowledges that happiness is incredibly complex; however in a sport setting, he believes it has less to do with flow and more to do with morale and high levels of motivation (p. 248). My study will incorporate Lazarus’ definition as well as Mihaly’s definition in the analysis of true happiness in sports. From my research, I hope to obtain more insight pertaining to this current topic of interest in sports psychology.

The terms optimal experience, peak performance, and flow seem similar, however, there are a few aspects that differentiate them. Optimal experience is a definition of happiness proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. It is an internal occurrence that varies between each individual and is something that we *make* happen (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.97). The act of doing and being completely involved in a task is what leads to maximum enjoyment, not the afterthought or reflection of the activity. According to Mihaly, optimal experience is based on “flow”, which is composed of the following: a challenging activity that requires skills, merging action and awareness, clear goals and feedback, undivided attention to the task at hand, a sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, and the transformation of time perception. In a sport setting, a few of these components also concern peak performance, which is when an athlete goes beyond what is expected of them in terms of playing or when they reach their full potential (Kimiecik & Jackson, 2002, p.504). In a study conducted by Jackson (1993), 75% of the athletes claimed that flow was always a contributing factor to their peak performances (Kimiecik & Jackson, 2002, p.505). When discussing peak performance and flow, the same concepts are often described and usually connect the two ideas together. For example, three broad factors that influence peak performance are motivation, attention to what is occurring during the competition, and full concentration on the task at hand (Lazarus, 2000, p. 240); these concepts are equivalent to goals and feedback and undivided attention to the task at hand.

Motivation and appraisal, which are similar to having clear goals and feedback, are two aspects that drive an athlete to compete. The actual accomplishment, or victory in sports, does not necessarily increase a person’s happiness; it is merely a symbol of success (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.115). The enjoyment a person experiences relates more to the effort and concentration they invest in their activity, and the feeling of satisfaction that comes from

their hard work. The goal setting aspect of peak performance and flow is one of the primary concepts of my research. Setting personalized goals focuses the athlete's attention and forces the individual to assume responsibility for his or her own achievements (Bunker, 1985, p.80). However, team goals are heavily influential on the individual's happiness as well (Hall, 1985, p.84). Goals, whether individual or collective, provide the athlete with direction. In terms of flow, goals contribute to an individual's complete involvement in their activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). They know what they are trying to accomplish and, therefore, can focus on what they need to do in order to reach that accomplishment.

Data Collection/Method

Since I work in the Athletic Training Room, I simply made copies of my survey and distributed them there. Overall, my study was designed to obtain an understanding from the athletes regarding how they relate peak performance, flow, being part of a team, and optimal experience. Because I conducted my research in this manner, my results are based on a narrow group of participants. However, there are a couple reasons why I preferred this method. First, due to the time restriction, it would have been difficult to contact coaches, determine practice times, and distribute the surveys to the athletes. Second, the athletes had more time to think about their answers as they were being treated for their injuries. I felt as though handing the surveys out around practice time would have been detrimental in regards to my research purposes. If they had, for example, been handed out by the coaches before practice, I believe the athletes would have rushed through in order to get on the field/court in order to stretch and warm up. If they had been handed out after, I felt as though the athletes would have been distracted (they would be physically and mentally tired, they would want to go home and shower, they

would want to go eat, etc.) For these reasons, the Training Room was the best setting since they were still in the sports mindset but at the same time, they were relaxed enough to thoroughly answer the questions. However, due to my methodology, it is most likely that I surveyed starters, or at least athletes who get playing time. Since they are in the Athletic Training Room seeking treatment for injuries, it is most probable that they play the most, their injuries being an indication of this. Furthermore, the sports that the athletes are from may have an effect on their responses. For example, an athlete who plays a more individual sport such as tennis or track and field may have a different approach to relating all the concepts than an athlete from an absolute team sport such as soccer or volleyball. However, these differences aside, I studied the overall attitudes of UCSB athletes. The small differences of *how* they compete will have little impact on the bigger picture of how flow, peak performance, and being part of a team correlate with optimal experience.

The surveys were dispensed over the course of 8 days. A total of 52 athletes participated in my study. Twenty five were women and 27 were men. The class breakdown is as follows: 7 freshmen, 17 sophomores, 17 juniors, and 11 seniors. At least one person from each sport, except golf, participated (see Table 1).

Table 1

Women's Sports	Number of athletes	Men's Sports	Number of athletes
Basketball	2	Baseball	2
Cross country/ track	9	Basketball	1
Soccer	1	Cross country/ track	5
Softball	3	Soccer	6
Swimming	1	Swimming	1
Tennis	2	Tennis	1

Track &Field	2	Track &Field	4
Volleyball	2	Volleyball	5
Water polo	3	Water polo	2

Data Results

The components of flow, peak performance, and team membership, as they relate to optimal experience, that my survey will analyze are a challenging, skill requiring activity, goals and feedback, and the “team comes first” mentality. Additionally the effects of emotions, specifically anxiety, on an athlete’s performance and optimal experience will be discussed.

Mihaly (1990) declares that “enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act” (p. 113). Competing is more enjoyable and victory more fulfilling when the athlete perceives his or her opponent as an equal or superior athlete. When asked when they would be happiest after a win, 25 athletes out of the 48 who responded claim they would be happiest after a blow out game against a high ranking team. Almost as prevalent, 19 athletes declare they would be happiest after winning a close game against a high ranking team. As expected, a victory against a high ranking team would be distinguished as overcoming a greater challenge than winning against an equal or worse team. This would lead to a heightened sense of accomplishment. Furthermore, twenty seven of the athletes claim that they would be least happy after winning a close game against a low ranking team. Because the skill level of the other team is understood to be lower than their own, the UCSB athletes would feel frustrated from having to have to deal with the unexpected challenge. Interestingly, six of the athletes would be least happy after blowing out a low ranking team. These individuals also exemplify Mihaly’s concept of needing a challenge that

can equal an individual's capabilities. Because the team is low ranking, these 6 athletes do not identify the game as a challenge and thus they would reach boredom rather than optimal experience. One athlete is an exception to the idea of needing a challenge; he declares "Winning is winning." Most athletes, however, care about the level of competition of their opponent.

An athlete also requires goals and feedback in order to attain peak performance and flow. A volleyball player that participated in my survey observed that individual goals and team goals are intertwined. However individual goals often conflict with team goals (Hall, 1985, p.84). From the survey I conducted, athletes tend to believe that the importance of fulfilling individual goals is outweighed by the importance of fulfilling the team's goals. The majority of the athletes emphasized the significance of being part of a team and wholeheartedly believed in "putting the team first" above all athletic personal needs. Whether or not this attitude leads to optimal experience depends on the individuals. Out of the 51 athletes who responded, 14 said they would not be happy if the team goals were accomplished while their own personal goals were not. These players would feel as though they had failed to achieve peak performance. Six of the 14 athletes prioritize individual performance above team performance. Four of these athletes, however, are from the more individualized sports: track and field, cross country, and tennis. One athlete explains, "No [I would not be happy], our sport is about individual performances coming together to score well against others. Being on a good team makes me happy, and it gets me excited and pumped up, but I do track and field to perform and win on my own; that is what comes first." In these athletes' situations, peak performance and flow are more crucial to happiness because achieving peak performance for them is equivalent to having their own individual victory. Referring back to Bunker's claim (setting personalized goals places the responsibility to achieve on the individual), when those goals are not met, the individual will feel

an amplified sense of self-disappointment. The remaining 8 of the 14 respondents, on the other hand, would feel dissatisfied because they would feel as though failing to reach individual goals results in failing to contribute to the team's success. These athletes exemplify the mentality of putting the team first, above personal aspirations. Fourteen athletes claim they would be happy, but not as happy as they could be. One athlete asserts, "Yes, I would feel accomplished because a certain level of success was met-but I would NOT be satisfied since my personal goals weren't." Several other athletes expressed the same sentiment of feeling happy but not wholly satisfied. Their optimal experience is deterred by their inability to reach peak performance, but is enhanced by the success of their team. Falling short of a peak performance would lead to incomplete happiness because this component of their optimal experience was lacking. Finally, 23 of the 52 athletes proclaim that they would be 100% happy if their team goals were accomplished while their personal goals were not. This correlates to Lazarus' idea of overall morale leading to happiness. One athlete remarks "I have had this happen before and yes, I do feel accomplished. I wish I could have met my personal goals, but all in all it's a team sport and so the fact that the team succeeded is very gratifying". In complete contrast to the athletes who responded "no" to question #10, one athlete asserts, "Yes [I would be happy], because the team's success is what's most important whether or not I was able to contribute with my own goals."

In addition to setting goals, the feedback an athlete receives is imperative to their optimal experience and to their peak performance. Positive feedback and encouragement are more influential and motivational than punishments (Bunker, 1985). For an elite athlete, feedback not only comes from the coach and teammates, it can also come from the media. When feedback is public, a great amount of people know how the athlete is performing; this aspect has the potential to negatively fuel an athlete's anxiety (Lazarus, 2000, p. 244). For the UCSB athletes, the Daily

Nexus articles are one media pathway. One athlete reports that “it does affect how you feel knowing that thousands of people will read if you win or lose.” For the most part, Daily Nexus articles have no effect or a positive effect on the athletes’ happiness and performance. Out of the 48 athletes who answered the question, 30 replied that the articles influence how they feel and 18 reported that the Nexus has no effect. If it does influence them, it affects how they feel, not how they play. Twenty eight of them reported that it stimulates team pride, motivation, encouragement, and an overall feeling of being happy with the recognition of their hard work. All but two of the 30 said that they ignore any and all negative comments generated by the articles. One athlete sums up all these sentiments by saying “Negative or positive articles add to the hunger to perform even better.” Contrary to Lazarus’ suggestion of media being detrimental, the Daily Nexus’ feedback positively affects the athletes (if at all). Most of the athletes emphasized being happy with the recognition the team was receiving, rather than any individual recognition. This exemplifies the importance of team membership in an individual’s optimal experience.

The importance of the team is also understood from a different point of view. The “putting the team first” attitude, in addition to team pride, is evident in most of the surveys. One of the questions that were asked on the survey was: How would you feel if your good friend on the team was given your starting position? Out of the 51 athletes who responded, only 2 expressed negative feelings. Hall (1985) proclaims that competition within a team can be beneficial overall because it will motivate all players to do their best. However, she also cautions that too much intrateam rivalry can degrade overall performance due to the athletes consistently trying to outdo each other (p. 86). The UCSB athletes appear to have a good balance between rivalry and team unity. While most of them would feel upset initially, they would all be able to

overcome their feelings if it was for the good of the team. They also contend that if their teammate was playing better than them, then losing their starting position would be understandable. They would cheer on their friend and encourage him or her, pushing them to be their best. In regards to practice though, losing a starting position would motivate the athletes to work harder in order to earn their spot back. Competing to the best of their potential optimizes the athletes' happiness. As mentioned earlier, peak performance of the team as well as individual peak performance can contribute to an individual's optimal experience.

In order to understand how the athletes themselves interconnect peak performance, flow, and team membership, they were asked why they wanted to be on the team. Two participants opted not to answer. Thirteen said because they love to compete, 10 answered to improve personal skill and grow as an athlete, or, as one athlete rephrased it, "To the best athlete that I can be", 6 prioritized being part of a team as their number one reason, 4 replied that they like winning, 1 wanted to represent UCSB, and one athlete wants to go on professionally. Improving personal skill and loving to compete correlate to peak performance and flow. Although instructed to choose only one of the choices, 6 athletes chose "love to compete" and one of the other choices. Most of the athletes chose the love of competing and/or improving as an individual as their number one reason for being on the team. Supporting the significance of flow, these athletes demonstrate how the actual act of playing leads to their enjoyment. Nine disregarded the instructions and chose all of them. At the collegiate level, all of these choices are expected to have significance on their desire to be on the team. By refusing to choose only one statement, these 9 athletes' responses indicate that all components—peak performance, flow and being part of a team—are equally important.

Studying the actual concepts of peak performance, flow, and being part of a team was the main focus of my research, however I also chose to study how emotions affect these components. Emotions have the potential to influence peak performance in particular, and thus affect an athlete's optimal experience. Pre-game anxiety can be beneficial, detrimental, or neutral in regards to the athlete's performance. The survey participants were asked: How do the "butterflies" before a big game affect you? Out of the 48 athletes who answered the question, 29 replied that the "butterflies" and the adrenaline rush make them play better. Two replied that they feel so anxious that they tend to make mistakes. Fifteen answered that they can control the butterflies and are able to play like they would during any other game. By being able to cope with this emotion, the athletes have the opportunity to reach peak performance.

The athletes were also asked to describe how they felt before, during, and after their first game at UCSB. This question was relatively open-ended and generated purely subjective responses. Overall, before the game, most athletes reported feeling anxious, proud, excited, focused, and nervous. These emotions were obviously generated by the pressure of the first game. The responses about how they felt during the game vary due to each individual athlete's ability to deal with the pre-game jitters. Hanin (1997) describes this as the "in-out of the zone" concept. Each individual has their own range or zone of anxiety level that allows them to perform their best. When pre-competition anxiety is near or in these individual zones, the athlete will have a peak performance (p. 59). However, when the anxiety level falls below or rises above the zone, their performance will be less than optimal. The athletes responded to their anxiety differently. Most responded that they felt focused during the game. However, the results for the other emotions varied. There were approximately 15 people for each of the following emotions: anxious, proud, excited, and relaxed. Six people felt frustrated, one person felt angry, one person

felt guilty, and 11 people reported feeling relaxed. There were other descriptions as well, such as physically exhausted, surprised, amazing, nervous, and one athlete reported feeling nothing. One way to interpret this athlete's response is that they were completely engulfed in their flow and did not allow any emotions to affect them. The people who felt relaxed described feeling less pressure once the actual competition began. Their flow and being involved in the game allowed them to reduce their anxiety levels. Frustration, anger, and guilt during the game were caused by failing to perform their best and by doing so disappointing their team or caused by not being given a chance to have a peak performance. One player's frustration was generated by his teammates not passing him the ball enough. A track athlete was frustrated because she was only assigned to one event and felt as though she could perform better if given more opportunities. After the game, the emotions that were most reported were relief, pride, excitement, and relaxation. Most were relieved because they were able to get through their first competition as a UCSB athlete. However, the majority of the athletes who reported feeling angry, frustrated, or guilty during the game also felt one or more of these emotions after the game. The negative emotions they felt during the game most likely affected their flow because if they focused on what was bothering them, they were not completely concentrated on their task. Lack of full concentration would also interfere with achieving a peak performance, which would in turn lead to more frustration. Most of the athletes who felt relieved, proud, excited, or relaxed mentioned being happy in their explanations. They were either happy because it was over, because they did the best they could, and/ or they won. Most were satisfied with their performances.

Conclusion

The research I conducted, both the survey and the literature research, provided me with more knowledge and interest in sport psychology. While the study went well, I would make a few adjustments if I needed to do it again. Due to the time constraint, I was unable to conduct all my research. Ideally, I would have had the opportunity to survey all UCSB athletes. Furthermore, if the survey were to be redone, I would format question #8 (emotions before, during and after the game) differently. I would specify the question so as to promote more quantifiable answers. It is important to understand that this survey only illustrates the mentality of intercollegiate athletes here at UCSB. If another group had been studied, such as intramural athletes, high school athletes, professional teams, etc., the results would have been much different.

Flow, peak performance, and being part of a team are all equal components of a collegiate athlete's optimal experience. One aspect is no more important than the others; they are all necessary to reach true happiness in athletics. The complete involvement in the competition will, in many cases, lead to peak performance. However, if a player does not achieve a peak performance, team success can perhaps compensate for it in terms of their happiness. Often the opportunity to achieve flow and peak performance, i.e. playing time, must be sacrificed in order to promote the overall success of the team. Emotions have the capability to interfere with each of the three aspects, however if the athlete is able to cope with the emotions, he or she can still attain optimal experience. Flow, peak performance, and being part of a team are truly equal components of an athlete's optimal experience—however there could be more. Hopefully, additional research will be conducted in the field of sport psychology that will further explain the different components of optimal experience and will provide a better understanding of happiness in sports.

Appendix

Survey

1. What year/class level are you?
 Fr So Jr Sr

2. What sport do you play? (Please indicate whether men's or women's team)

3. Please rank your reasons for wanting to win (1 being your #1 reason for wanting to win)
 For personal satisfaction
 So my team can make it to playoffs
 So UCSB looks good
 Because winning not only makes me happy, it makes the whole team happy
 Make my family, coaches, and teammates proud
 Other _____

4. Do articles about your team in the sports section of the Daily Nexus affect the way you feel/play?

5. How do "the butterflies" before a big game affect you?
 I feel so anxious that I tend to make mistakes during the game
 The adrenaline rush makes me play better
 I can control it, and I play the same as I would any other game
 I never get "the butterflies"

6. If you're a starter, if good friend on the team was given your starting position, how would you feel and why?

7. Please rank the following (1 being the top choice, 8 being the last choice): After a win, I would be happiest...

- if it were a close game against a high ranking team
- if it were a close game against a team that is equal to my team in terms of rank
- if it were a close game against a low ranking team
- if it were a blow-out game against a high ranking team
- if it were a blow-out game against a team equal to my own team
- if it were a blow-out game against a low ranking team
- if it were a close game, regardless of the opponent's rank
- if it were a blow-out game, regardless of the opponent's rank

8. Think back to the first game you played in at UCSB. How did you feel before, during, and after the game? Check all that apply

Before _____ Please explain why you felt the way you did.

- angry
- frustrated
- anxious
- guilty
- relieved
- proud
- excited
- relaxed
- focused
- other _____

During _____

- angry
- frustrated
- anxious
- guilty
- relieved
- proud
- excited
- relaxed
- focused
- other _____

After _____

- angry
- frustrated
- anxious

- guilty
- relieved
- proud
- excited
- relaxed
- focused
- other _____

9. Why do you want to be on the team? Choose one.
- Improve my personal skills and grow as an athlete
 - Winning
 - Being part of the team
 - Representing UCSB
 - Love to compete
 - Other _____

10. Would you feel accomplished if your team's goals were met, but your personal goals were not? Explain.

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