A SUBJECTIVE STUDY
OF THE ATHLETES' GREATEST
MOMENT IN SPORT

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"Everything was so perfect, everything so right, that it couldn't
be any other way," stated a skier describing his most
wonderful moment while skiing. He revealed further, "I used
to think of it as me and the mountain for it was a solitary
counter. At first it was me and it was as if there were two of
us and it was both of us. I did not attempt to master it, beat it,
finesse it or cheat it. The closest thing I can say about it was
that there seemed to be tracks in the snow that my skis were
made to fit in... It was no longer me and the hill, but both of us,
it was perfect, I belonged there." At the end of his run he
stated, "I felt like I was radiating in every direction, not with
pressure but with joy. I felt a tremendous amount of heat. I
was totally filled up with joy like a helium balloon, and it was
fantastic." He was attempting to describe his experience
while skiing. This particular run down the mountain was
more than good, clean exercise, for within it he experienced a
unique harmony between the mountain and himself.

What this particular athlete described may be termed a peak-
experience, a phenomenon conceptualized by psychologist
Abraham MASLOW. A peak-experience is the most intense,
most joyous, most memorable moment in an individual's life.
Its foundation is a personal subjective experience from which
abstract knowledge may be built; these experiences are
often difficult to communicate since our language doesn't
possess the vocabulary to commote the incredible emotional
qualities experienced by the individual involved. MASLOW
found that at these particular moments, the individual's
experiences total happiness equally as important, he often loses
all fear, inhibitions and weaknesses. Peak experiences are
also the moments of an individual's greatest maturity and
fulfillment; it is as if man's humanity is reaching its furthest
possible reaches of development.

MASLOW did considerable research on the peak-experience and
outlined its most common characteristics; however, in
his writings, he did not specifically discuss the peak-
experience as it relates to sport. I decided to study the reports
of those peak-experiences which occurred when the athlete
was actively participating in sport, as distinguished from a
peak-experience that is a result of participation, i.e., a medal
for one's performance in a race.

Traditionally the emphasis of sport research has been on
training the athlete, with the goal of improving performance
which is objectively measured in the actual contest. Indeed,
as a result of this emphasis, much progress has been made in
understanding the human body and how it functions in
relation to specific sport movements. Researchers have also
developed scientific and effective techniques to improve the
athlete's physical performance. Many of our training pro-
grams for athletic teams and physical education classes tend
to overlook the fact that we are working with more than just a
physical body. We are actually concerned with a total and
complete individual. Limited research has been conducted on
the subjective or personal feelings that the athlete expe-
riences while participating in sport. I contend that we can
further develop new dimensions in the study of sport if we
examine it from a total perspective.

This study has shown that sport possesses a meaning and
purpose that transcends the everyday view of it. One way to
have this new perspective on sport is to explore the subjec-
tive domain of the peak-experience.

The purpose of this study was not to generalize for all people
engaged in sport, but to draw conclusions about the nature of
the peak-experience from the descriptions provided in an
attempt to determine what qualities are to be found in the
peak-experience.

THE INTERVIEW

When one attempts to explore an emotional phenomenon
such as the peak-experience, one must employ techniques
other than the usual quantitative methods of research.
Therefore, my study focused on the personal experiences of
20 athletes, all of whom I interviewed in depth. The subjects
included 18 men and 4 women, ranging in age from 19 to 40
years; eleven of the athletes described experiences that
occurred while participating in team sports (football, volleyball,
lacrosse, hockey), and nine described experiences that
occurred in individual sports (cycling, swimming, track and
field, jogging). Twelve of the athletes were playing or had
played on college varsity teams, three participated on the
intramural level in college, two participated in recreational
activities, specifically, skiing, and three of the athletes were
members of the 1972 Olympic Team.

Because many of the athletes had never previously shared
this experience with anyone, I began by attempting to move in
the direction of a meaningful rapport with each of the
individuals. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed
atmosphere so that the individual interviewed was more apt
to be comfortable and share his experience with me. During
the first part of the interview (usually about twenty minutes) I
attempted to share my mutual interests with the subject in an
attempt to "break the ice." The interview proceeded as soon
as the individual revealed he or she was at ease and willing to
converse freely with me. I discussed with each athlete his
general sports background. Next I asked them to name some
of their great experiences while participating in sport. After
discussing some of the athlete's great experiences, I focused
on my major questions: "What has been your single, most
joyous, happiest, blissful, wonderful moment in your sport
experience while participating?" From this point, other ques-
tions were asked in no particular order and not necessarily in
every case, to stimulate discussion of the experience. These
included: "How did you feel differently about yourself?"
"How did the world look differently?" "How did you change?"
The emphasis was on flowing with the experience as it was
being reflected upon. I used questions as they applied to the
immediate situation and not because I had previously deter-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualities</th>
<th>Percentage of Subjects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loss of fear *</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to execute basic skills</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No thinking of performance</td>
<td>95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual gives full attention *</td>
<td>95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(total immersion in activity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Narrow focus of attention</td>
<td>95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The experience is perfect *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Temporary phenomenon</td>
<td>95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling of being godlike (In Control) *</td>
<td>95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-validating experience *</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-voluntary experience</td>
<td>90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unique experience</td>
<td>90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception of the universe as integrated and unified *</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive perception (Effortless) *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time-Space disorientation *</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awe and wonder of the experience *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transcendence of ordinary self *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fusion of the individual *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unique being of the individual *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rich perception during experience *</td>
<td>45%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unity of the world *</td>
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<td>Athlete in good physical condition</td>
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<td>Accomplished goal</td>
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<td>Premotion of experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Classifying perception *</td>
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<td>Important to have spectators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fusion of dichotomies *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness of the absolute *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract perception *</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature of the object in itself *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meaning to life in general</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussed experience with others</td>
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Represents qualities MASLOW (1968, pp. 74-96) discussed in relation to peak-experiences.

**Unique Experience for the Athlete**

The sport peak-experience is always unique — it stands apart from "normal" daily living. This uniqueness may be attributed to the intensity of the experience. A sampling of the athletes' comments shows a wide diversity of experiences, and yet, at the same time, a remarkable similarity; a surfer reporting his feeling of oneness with a wave said, "There is no way this could happen twice." A swimmer noted: "This was a whole new experience for me. I never did anything to this degree before. There is no way this could happen twice." A football player said, "I haven't been able to duplicate it or even come close to it in eight years of football."

It is important to point out that the circumstances or sport environment need not be out of the ordinary in order for a peak-experience to occur. The uniqueness lies in the way that one experiences the phenomenon. For example, winning a game or achieving a record (stop watch) time are not necessarily unique experiences. In fact, they are quite common. It is the quality of uniqueness which causes the participant to regard it as a personal treasure, greater than any trophy.
anything I wanted." This feeling of being at the height of one's power, as if invincible, provides the athlete with a feeling of control over whatever may confront him. Another football player stated, "Everything rotates around you: you don't rotate around it. You are on top." The player is in the center and controlling the situation which is pertinent in the territorial game of football. Another football player discussed the control he had of the crowd: "I felt completely in control of the crowd; I could push a button and make it go wild."

The second way that the athlete experiences control was explained best by a hockey player: "Since you are in control of the situation, you don't think about it; it just happens." A cyclist explained, "I don't think about it or attempt to control it. It is pertinent to take note that this cyclist experiences a total blackness during his peak-experiences. I asked him how he kept his bike on the track if all he observed was blackness and he explained, "I just can tell where I am... The situation is in control, not me. I experience a freedom in that I do nothing because it is happening."

A skier described this lack of concern to control the situation in the following statement, "It didn't make sense to control the situation. The dimensions of control were irrelevant. I didn't even think about it." A runner revealed: "Things are right; it does it on its own. I am not too concerned with controlling it. It is so enjoyable there is no need for control. I let it be because it is so great."

If the athletes interviewed, those athletes who participated in team sports generally discussed control in regard to a complete control of the situation. Those athletes who participated in an individual sport generally exhibited a lack of concern for control of the situation, perhaps because they were independent of anyone else.

3. Loss of Fear

Associated with this perfection and control is a total loss of fear. Because the "normal" self is transcended, all of the problems, fears and difficulties of one's everyday life are also transcended. All but one of the athletes interviewed revealed that there was absolutely no fear during their sport peak-experience. A football player said, "I knew what I was doing; there was nothing to be afraid of." A skier described, "Yes, many times I'm afraid while skiing, but this time I flew through it without being afraid as usual." The usual fear or pressure that an athlete experiences is transcended in the peak-experience. There are many possible explanations for this phenomenon. It might be because, as all of the athletes stated, they were in such control of the situation, or so on top of it all, that there was nothing to fear. There was one exception: a football player who revealed during his discussion of making six blocks in one play, that the sport experience is not necessarily logical. "I wanted to stop... it was too perfect... I was too afraid to let it all go through." In this instance, the play was going so well that it was too much for him to handle, probably because blocking six men on one play is not supposed to happen.

9. Effortlessness

Since the individual transcends himself, the movement becomes effortless. He no longer has to consciously move himself; he just moves. Every athlete surveyed stated that there was absolutely no conscious deliberation in executing the skill. The skier did not think, "Now I do this, then that, and finally this." Many of the athletes interviewed referred to this as reacting or muscle memory. A football player reflected upon the incredible ease of a particular block: "So many times I put everything into it but nothing happens. But this time I hit him just right and everything went perfectly. Just right... effortless... I hit him and he just flew. Physically, I didn't put as much as usual in it..." A hockey player explained, "It is just like a dream. You seem to be doing everything right with no problems. Everything is going for you. You have the physical under total control." A butterfly swimmer who usually experienced agonizing pain at the end of all his previous races revealed that after going all out, "I couldn't feel any pain which is really weird, for me... take away the pain and it is effortless. I had hardly any feeling of my arms and legs... my whole body was doing it with ease."

Pain which may be associated with an all-out effort was not recalled by the athletes in describing their great experience. A football player, in recounting a key tackle, states "There is a feeling of total effortlessness. There is a hit where the person feels like air and you feel no pain."

10. Self-Validating Experience

All of the athletes interviewed agreed that the sport peak-experience is a self-validating phenomenon. The experience is total, complete, self-validating and independent of the external circumstances. A woman volleyball player said it best: "The experience is in the process while participating. It sometimes happens that the end result may distract from it, but it is still valid." In all cases, the athlete knew he had a great experience. Even if the contest or game was lost the particular experience, all the athletes stressed, had a beauty, wonder and uniqueness that superceded the final score.

11. Basic Skill Level

Essential to the sport peak-experience is the ability of the athlete to execute the basic skill without having to worry about or contemplate his technique. The athlete must have complete control of the basic skills; if he must think of his next movement, then it is impossible for him to become a union with the experience.

The athlete does not have to be an expert with years of experience although in some sports it might take that long to develop the necessary skills. Briefly, the athlete just has to be comfortable with an in control of the fundamental techniques. For example, a beginning skier must be very conscious of every shift in body weight and must constantly be anticipating his next movement. Only after the individual no longer has to be thinking and mentally contriving his next movement can the sport peak-experience occur.