Background to Maslow's Research
by Kenneth Ravizza

INTRODUCTION TO MASLOW'S WORK

Many people have experienced certain moments in their life where they have an ultimate experience that stands out from their usual existence. At the time of this experience, there may be various sensations, perceptions, and feelings of being totally integrated, unified, at peace, or just feeling great. Almost every culture and religion has had labels for this state. St. Paul called it the "peace that passeth understanding," and Zen Buddhists use the term satori or kensho. Yoga implements the label Moksha. Taoists use the term "the absolute Tao, and the Quakers coined the concept of inner light to represent these moments. (81:VIII)

Many philosophers have explored this phenomenon; they have also affixed labels to it. Martin Buber spoke of it in relation to the I-thou relationship; Jean-Paul Sartre refers to it as the Perfect Moment, and Marshall McLuhan explains it in the context of the "hot-Cool. In this study, psychologist Abraham Maslow's concept of the peak experience will be developed to determine whether or not this phenomenon exists in the sport experience.

Background to Maslow and His Work

Abraham Maslow was a prominent leader in the field of psychology; he was also an adventurous scientist who liked to "plow new ground" and then walk away from it. His explanation for his constant exploration of unknown domains is concise: I get bored. I like discovery, not proving. (14:37) Maslow was one of the leaders, as well as the chief source of inspiration, of a group of psychologists who were concerned with new ideas and approaches to psychology. Known as the Third Force Psychology or Humanistic Psychology, to distinguish themselves from the other two major forces in psychology, namely psychoanalysis and behaviorism, the members turned away from logical positivism, behaviorism, and Cartesianism, and all other major schools of psychology, and concentrated on studying the healthy human being.

These humanistic psychologists focused upon the individual utilizing his experiential knowledge, rather than imposing abstract systems. This new approach centered upon the whole individual in contrast to the Cartesian concept of a "splitman", i.e., a distinction between body and mind. The humanists focused upon a foundation of the personal, subjective experience of the individual, from which abstract knowledge could be theorized.

Previously, many psychologists had deliberated over the "unhealthy," abnormal and deviant qualities of man: Maslow believed, however, that it was pertinent for psychologists to also explore the healthy aspects of man. For this reason, he selected the best specimens of mankind that he could locate and studied these individuals in order to discover what was so unique about them. Maslow originally initiated this approach in an attempt to understand two teachers that he was working with who had significantly affected him. He felt an amazing quality or "presence" when he interacted with these people, namely Dr. Ruth Benedict and Max Wertheimer. This avenue of inquiry later led to his development of the concept of the self actualized person which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Maslow's emphasis and intent concerning the individual was that psychology should attempt to aid in the fullest development of the particular individual. As he worked, and opened new avenues in this area, he gradually developed a conceptual vocabulary to communicate his new findings. Terms such as self-actualization, peak-experience, hierarchy of need," "B-values," "deficiency needs," and many other constructs were developed. It is not this investigator's
intention to present the reader with an in-depth analysis of Maslow's pioneering research; instead, the reader will be provided with a basic outline and summary of his research that is related to the peak-experience and this study.

The Peak-Experience

According to Maslow, the peak-experience is the most wonderful, most joyous, most blissful moment or moments of an individual's life. It is an extremely difficult term to define; therefore the first section of this chapter will briefly develop the material related to it. A basic presentation of Maslow's personality theory and his term self-actualization will be presented, followed by an exploration of two constructs that he often implemented in relation to the peak-experience, transcendence and the plateau-experience. It is important to grasp a working knowledge of these terms since they provide insight into the peak-experience.

Discussion of Maslow's Personality Theory

Maslow's personality theory is based upon the assumption that man has a unique inner nature; The basic human emotions and the basic capabilities are on their face, either neutral, pre-moral, or positively 'good'. " (40:3). This humanistic conception of man explains that it is possible for man to develop to his fullest capabilities by allowing the individual's inner nature to determine what his particular direction in life should be. Maslow believed that man had an intrinsic conscience which was based upon the unconscious and preconscious notion . . .

of our own nature, of our own destiny, of our own capabilities, of our own 'call' in life. It insists that we be true to our inner nature and that we do not deny it out of weakness or for advantage or for any reason. (49:7)

Maslow carries this understanding of the Self or inner nature to its furthermost extreme by stating:

. . . that knowledge of one's own deep nature is also simultaneously knowledge of human nature in general. (40:111)

Maslow put great worth on the discovery of self and he developed the concept of self-actualization in an attempt to describe these individuals who he had discovered, through his research, exemplified this inward quest.

The Hierarchy of Needs of the Individual

One aspect of human behavior is "motivation" which is often thought to refer to the drives, urges, wishes, desires or needs that determine a person's actions. In other words, it is generally agreed that man, in order to survive, has certain physiological needs that must be satisfied. One must breathe, eat, drink, excrete, keep warm, and sleep. Thus, one's behavior is motivated by these drives in order to survive. However, once one's basic physiological needs are satisfied, they cease to exist as active determinants or organizers of behavior. Since physiological needs are life-sustaining, they must be adequately met before one can devote energy to psychological considerations. It is at this point, therefore, that the individual can attempt to meet some psychological needs that are present. Although the physiological needs are self-evident, there
are no clear-cut psychological needs that are considered universal. Maslow has done the most extensive work of any psychologist in this area and has developed a hierarchy of needs.

Maslow states that once the physiological needs are met, one must deal with safety needs. These are followed by the need for love, affection, and belongingness which, once achieved, are followed by the self esteem needs (i.e., for achievement, adequacy) which also include esteem from others (status, attention, importance, appreciation). If one is successful in meeting these needs, he will have feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength and being useful. The ultimate need which very few people achieve is that of self-actualization, a sort of ultimate state of being, rather than growth.

Maslow defines self-actualization as . . .

an episode, or a spurt in which the powers of the person come together in a particularly efficient and intensely enjoyable way, and in which he is more integrated, and less split, more open for experience, more perfectly actualizing his potentialities, closer to the core of his being, more fully human. (49:97)

In addition, he notes that self-actualization is "a matter of degree and of frequency rather than an all or none affair . . . " (49:97). The self-actualized person is therefore capable of having a greater number and more intense peak-experiences than the average person. The concept 'self-actualizing people' describes not only the people but also the ideal limit which they approach." (40:132)

Since the self-actualized individual's basic physiological, safety and protection, belongingness, love and esteem needs are met, the individual can focus all of his or her energy upon the fullest growth of the self. One essential point that Maslow expresses is that self-actualized people have problems of a different kind or at a different level than the individual who is struggling to meet one's basic needs. This level at which self-actualized people may suffer deprivation is called the "metamotivational level" or "even though he has transcended the problems of becoming, there remain the problems of Being." (40:210) Clearly, Maslow does not want to mislead people into believing that self-actualization is the be-all and the end-all.

The Concept of the Plateau-Experience

The plateau-experience is a concept Maslow used in comparison to the peak-experience. The plateau-experience has the characteristics of being peaceful, calm, more voluntary; it also has cognitive elements. "It then becomes a witnessing, an appreciating, what one might call a serence, cognitive blissfulness which can, however, have a quality of casualness . . . " (46: XV) Maslow gave the example of a mother watching her baby with total vision and awareness. The mother is fully and completely involved in the experience with her child. The experience is voluntary in the sense that the individual can set the stage that allow it to occur as well as exercise control during the situation.

In comparison, the peak-experience is poignantly emotional. One is never sure when this phenomenon will occur, and for this reason there is great surprise and disbelief, or what Maslow calls "ecstatic shock". This shock or ecstatic feeling may be so great that the individual may even scream with joy. Maslow mentioned one man who recalled a "burst of exuberance going over into sheer crazy, childish joy . . . he could yell out his great happiness . . . (44:14) Thus, the peak-experience happens involuntarily while the individual is totally engrossed in the phenomenon.
Maslow explained that as one gets older, peak-experiences do not occur as frequently, which might appear to be a protective device, since many older people would not be able to handle the emotional trauma sometimes involved. The great moments, therefore, tend to become the more calm and more serene plateau-experiences rather than the intense involuntary peak-experiences.

The Concept of Transcendence

Transcendence is the final concept that will be developed before the discussion of the peak-experience. Maslow's use of the term is based upon one of his last articles entitled, "The Various Meanings of Transcendence." (50). In this article he describes the many feelings associated with the phenomenon of transcendence.

Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than as means, to one-self, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos. (50:66)

It is not a transient phenomena like the peak-experience, but more like the Hindu concept of Moksha or Liberation. It is a constant state of being at the highest level of consciousness or being indefinitely. One would not necessarily fluctuate in and out of this state. Maslow summarizes the relationship of the peak-experience to transcendence in the following paragraph:

A transient glimpse is certainly possible in the peak-experience which may, after all, come sometimes to anyone. But so to speak, to take up residence on the high plateau of Unitive consciousness - that is another matter altogether. That tends to be a life-long effect. It should not be confused with the Thursday-evening turn-on that many youngsters think of as the path to transcendence. For that matter, it should not be confused with any single experience. The 'spiritual disciplines', both the classical ones and the new ones that keep on being discovered these days, all take time, work discipline, study, commitment. (46:CVI)

Thus, one can see the great respect and esteem Maslow had for man's development. Man can progress through the basic physiological safety, love and esteem needs, to finally attain self-actualization, where he can become the fullest and most complete of human beings. The voluntary, calm, plateau-experience may often be experienced as one proceeds through the various stages, but the concept of transcendence is experienced by a very select group of individuals.

Problems in the Research of the Peak-Experience

Maslow conducted his research on peak-experiences by asking people what was their most wonderful experience or experiences in their life; he then asked people what they felt at that particular moment. The peak-experience is a highly subjective term and consequently it is an extremely difficult concept to put into words. Maslow found that the individual usually didn't have too many problems reflecting upon his most wonderful experience, for it usually stood out
very clearly. Maybe it was having sex for the first time, being with a loved one watching a sunset at Big Sur, or maybe it was washing a new car to a crystal clear appearance. It seemed to be any type of activity that the individual totally immersed himself in.

EXPLANATION OF THE PEAK-EXPERIENCE

Maslow utilized the term peak-experience as a generalization for "the best moments of the human being, for the happiest moments of life, for experiences of ecstasy, rapture, bliss, of the greatest joy. (40:105) At these particular moments, the individual experiences total happiness; just as important, there is often a loss of fears, inhibitions, weaknesses and insecurity reported. In addition, peak-experiences are also the moments of "greatest maturity, individuation, fulfillment--in a word, (an individual's) healthiest moments. (49:97) It is an ultimate experience for the individual in the sense that he may feel the total unity and wholeness of his being. There is also a total fascination with the matter at hand, "getting lost in the present" or a detachment from time and place. (40:62)

A central point pertaining to the peak-experience is that it is a transient experience--a temporary phenomenon and not a permanent event. "Some of the effects or after-effects may be permanent but the high moment itself is not." (44:14) This is a major difference between self-actualization which can be a more constant mode of operations for the individual.

Maslow illustrated the relationship between the peak-experience and self-actualization by demonstrating how the non-self-actualized person or the person working at the lower levels of his hierarchy of needs, may, during a peak-experience, have a transient glimpse of self-actualization. Thus, during a peak-experience, the individual may experience some of the qualities of the self-actualized individual. Maslow refers to the peak-experience as being similar to a temporary trip to heaven: "I have likened the peak-experience in a metaphor to a visit to a personally defined heaven from which the person then return to earth." (46:66) Briefly, then, the peak-experience can be denoted to mean a particular experience where the individual has an ecstatic, non-voluntary transient experience of being totally integrated, at peace with himself, or obtaining a higher state of awareness. The experience comes and it goes, but it cannot be forgotten.

In his early research, Maslow thought that the peak-experience would occur more often among "religious" individuals, poets, artists, and musicians; however, in the most recent article on the subject, he stated:

I have found approximately as many transenders among businessmen, industrialists, managers, educators, political people as I have among the professionally religious . . . and others who are supposed to be transenders and are officially labelled so. (48:46)

Maslow also believed that everyone was capable of having peak-experiences but certain people were afraid to see them.

I finally fell into the habit of expecting everyone to have peak-experiences and of being rather surprised if I ran across somebody who could report none at all. (46:22)
He developed the term "non-peaker" to describe not the person who is unable to have peak-experiences, but rather, "the person who is afraid of them, who suppresses them, who denies them, who turns away from them or who forgets them." (46:22)

The Ability to Control or Determine Peak-Experiences

An important aspect of the peak-experience is that one cannot control when he or she will have the peak-experience. The peak experience is non-voluntary. "We cannot command the peak-experience. It happens to us." (49:87) As discussed earlier, this non-voluntary nature is what distinguishes the peak experience from the plateau-experience. Since the peak-experience often provides people with a truly meaningful experience that gives the individual's life great significance, Maslow believed the individual could attempt to "force the issue, push actively, strive and hunt and fight for them." (46:IX)

Of course we can make it more likely or less likely, out of our experiences of the past. Some fortunate people can almost always have a peak-experience in sex... But none of these is ever guaranteed to bring on a peak-experience. The most propitious frame of mind for 'receiving' them is one of receptivity, amid a kind of passivity, or trust or surrender, a Taoistic attitude of letting things happen without interfering or butting in. (44:13)

A key factor, then, is that the person must open himself up or make himself as receptive in the Taoist sense of letting things happen. One must become silent, fully listening, patient, non-interfering, and respectful of and conscious of the matter at hand.

In summary, almost any situation where perfection can be attained, or hope fulfilled, or perfect gratification reached, can bring about a peak-experience.

It looks as if any experience of real perfection, of any moving toward the perfect justice or toward perfect values tends to produce a peak-experience. (40:175)

MASLOW'S FINDINGS: NINETEEN QUALITIES OF THE PEAK-EXPERIENCE

In this section, the major findings of Maslow's research concerning the cognitions one may experience during the peak-experience will be discussed. Maslow questioned 190 college students about their life; he had them elaborate on how they felt during these moments. From this study, he ascertained that there were nineteen basic qualities that people experience during a peak-experience. An important point to remember is that no one experiences the same qualities, or even all the nineteen qualities. A person may only experience two or three qualities and still have a peak-experience. It appears to be more a matter of intensity of qualities rather than quantity.

Maslow believed that emotional, non-voluntary peak-experiences overlapped or tended to be alike. The means used to initiate a peak-experiences whether in music, art, dance, or working out a mathematical proof, would result in a similar experience.