Potential of the Sport Experience

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I never played basketball like that before; there was such an incredible feeling of control, strength, flow, and inner power as I drove to the basket. I knew I could do anything I wanted on the court. Nothing was resisting me as I moved effortlessly toward the basket again and again. There was no distinction between myself, the ball, and the basket—we all were together.

These were the feelings I had while practicing basketball alone on a deserted playground court at the age of thirteen. It began on one particular drive toward the basket in which I drove around four giant imaginary defensive players, stopped, faked right, and shot the ball to the left. After that drive, things just started to fall into place and my driving got more and more intense. I would drive in, go through various movements, shoot the ball, and then bring it out and drive in again. I did not think about anything; I just moved with the ball in a way that I never previously had.

I am still not certain of the exact duration of this experience for I was so involved that I lost track of the time. Time was not relevant to me; playing with that ball and leaping effortlessly toward the hoop were all that mattered. After a while, I stopped and I was not certain what had occurred, but I definitely knew it was something very special for me. I had never realized that I could move with a basketball like that, consequently, I experienced a real boost of confidence from this new knowledge of my capabilities. I can still recall walking home with a feeling of being totally satisfied and proud of my abilities, which was reflected by a large smile on my face, radiating with an intense joy. This experience has always retained a special meaning for me. Whenever I think about it, I put myself right back there and reflect on some of the great feelings that I had.

About 10 years later when I was a graduate student, I was reading the book Toward A Psychology of Being by psychologist Abraham Maslow in which he developed the concept of the peak-experience. It was a generalization of the greatest moments of life, of experiences of fantastic joy, bliss, ecstasy, and sheer delight. When I reflected on experiences I had that were similar to his description, my playground basketball experience immediately came to mind. That was an experience that really stood out for me, and I viewed it as a personal treasure that provided incredible meaning for my lifelong love of sport. As I reflected on Maslow's concept I thought of all the time that athletes dedicate to sport, and it appeared likely that many athletes have similar experiences that really stand out for them. Becoming intrigued with this area, I talked with other athletes to learn if they had enjoyed similar experiences. I was surprised to find that most of them could recall a sport experience radiating the same kind of intensity as my own basketball experience. At this point I began an in-depth reading of Maslow's work to obtain a clearer understanding of this type of phenomenon.

Maslow described the peak-experience as a moment in which the individual experiences total happiness, a loss of the fears, inhibitions, weaknesses, and insecurities that often plague most of us. In addition, peak-experiences are moments of great maturity, fulfillment, individuality, or the healthiest moments for the individual in the sense that he may feel the total unity, inner strength, and wholeness of his being. The person experiences a total fascination and awe of the matter at hand, as though he were "lost" in the experience.

A central point pertaining to the peak-experience is that it is a transient experience—a temporary phenomenon analogous to a gentle summer breeze which comes and goes. Maslow referred to the peak-experience as being similar to a temporary trip to heaven.

"I have likened the peak-experience in a metaphor to a personally defined heaven from which the person then returns to earth."

Briefly, then, the peak-experience can be denoted to mean a particular experience in which the individual has an ecstatic, nonvoluntary, transient experience of being totally integrated, at peace with himself, functioning fully, and in complete control of the situation. Frank Goble, in his book The Third Force, makes the following comparison, "...with an engine that suddenly hits all cylinders and performs perfectly, producing a real surge of power, whereas it had been missing, sputtering, and running poorly."
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From the aforementioned description, one might assume that in order to undergo a peak experience the individual would have to take up residence in an Ashram in Tibet, go in the mountains and meditate, or sit under a tree and ponder the great truths. Maslow, however, did not find this to be the case. He believed that these experiences were natural.

They don't necessarily take years of training or study. They are not restricted to far-out people, i.e., to monks, saints, or yogis, Zen Buddhists, Orientals, or people in any special state of grace. It is not something that happens in the Far East, in special places, or to specially trained and chosen people. It's available in the midst of life to everyday people in everyday occupations.  

He also pointed out the conditions and sources of peak-experiences.

...the sacred is in the ordinary, that it is, to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends and family, in one's backyard, and travel may be a flight from confronting the sacred. 

The peak-experience is common to all places and times and people. One may liken the peak-experience to the Oriental concept of Nirvana, which is not a future location like heaven that one may go to after death, but rather is the "here and now." Simply stated, we do not have to die to experience the heaven within us. This type of experience is not unique to modern man. It has been with human beings since antiquity. Almost every culture and religion refer to this type of experience. St. Paul called it the "peace that passeth understanding," Zen Buddhists, the term "satori" or "kensho," and Yoga, "moksha." Taoists use the term "the absolute Tao" and the Quakers coined the expression of the "inner light" to represent these moments.  

It is important to realize that the peak-experience is natural, and not a supernatural experience with strict dogma accompanying it. In reference to the origins of peak-experiences, Maslow stated:

They came from the great moments of love and sex, from the great moments (particularly of music), from the bursts of creativeness, and the creative furor (the great inspiration), from great moments of insight and of discovery ... from certain athletic experiences.  

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Increasing Levels of Consciousness

As Maslow stated, the "sacred is in the ordinary," so it follows that the sport experience provides an environment for this type of highly subjective phenomenon. As he explained: "The love for the body, awareness of the body—these are clearly good paths to peak-experiences."

Sport provides an environment in which one can become totally engrossed in the activity that one is participating in. Sport has a "special air" to it: there is a set time to play, a specified area to perform within, and specific rules that must be followed. There is also a score to which we can refer in order to observe how well we are doing in relation to the other participants. How often in our daily lives do we find things this precise and well defined? Usually our lives are cluttered with ambiguity, whereas sport provides us with an explicit structure which creates an atmosphere in which we can transcend the mundane daily problems, such as earning money, preparing for exams, keeping up with inflation. Because the rules provide all the guidelines and structure, one is free to focus all of one's energies on the well-defined task at hand and go all out to pursue the desired objectives. This may result in an explosion of man's energy on one specific task for a specified time, and it often becomes an explosion of sheer joy. This all-out effort may provide the athlete with a new personal knowledge of his potential in that specific activity.

In addition, participation in sport is freely chosen by the athlete, he is not compelled to participate. Because it is voluntary he is more apt to become involved, since he always has the prerogative to drop out at any point. As David Reisman stated: "Play may prove to be the sphere in which there is still room left for would-be autonomous man to reclaim his individual character from the pervasive demands of his social character." In playing sport, the individual may have a multitude of subjective experiences that turn him on to the sport experience, and most importantly, make him aware of the outer reaches of himself as a moving person. The peak-experience is one of the experiences that may provide the athlete with significant insights into his sport participation, and his life in general. Sport definitely has unlimited meaning for the participating athlete; why else would he expend so much time and energy? It is this dedication to sport that allows him to get totally wrapped up in it and enjoy the intensity of the peak-experience.

THE PEAK-EXPERIENCE

Many researchers in physical education and sport have referred to the fantastic affective experiences which sport provides.
the athlete, but few have offered a specific explanation as to what these experiences felt like to the athletes. For this reason, I wanted to interview athletes in order to ascertain their subjective experiences. What were their feelings during their greatest moments while actually participating in sport? I interviewed 20 athletes who had participated at all levels, from informal jogging to Olympic competition. The interviews lasted from one to two hours, and I attempted to grasp an understanding of the person's experience while participating in sport.

The athletes recalled that they were so involved in the experience that they lost sight of the "normal" conscious self. Some athletes went further—their involvement caused them to become one with the experience. In other words, they experienced such an integration and unity with the activity that they no longer perceived a distinction between the experience and the "self." A woman discus thrower explained: "I became the motion, for all purposes I was motion." From the interviews, I discovered 13 closely related qualities that the athletes shared during their greatest moments while participating in sport.

A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE FOR THE ATHLETE

The sport peak-experience is unique—it stands apart from normal daily living and the usual involvement in sport. The uniqueness may be attributed to the intensity or quality of the experience. Often, there is an "ecstatic shock" associated with the phenomenon. 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 again." If the sport peak-experience is not unique, it would become common, and if the phenomenon occurs frequently, then it would not stand out. This does not mean, however, that the circumstances or the sport environment need be out of the ordinary for the peak-experience to occur. The uniqueness lies in the way that one experiences the phenomenon, and it is this uniqueness that often makes it a personal treasure, greater than any trophy.

NONVOLUNTARY EXPERIENCE

An athlete cannot control or determine when the peak-experience will occur. It can be compared to a sudden breeze on a calm and sultry day which stirs the garments and refreshes the spirit, but nothing one consciously does can make it return. The athlete, however, may set the stage for the phenomenon by getting into the necessary physical and mental condition. This is accomplished by totally engrossing himself in the experience, and doing whatever he needs to do to be open to the experience. Yet, even this will not guarantee a peak-experience. As a cyclist so appropriately explained: "I am a vehicle for this (peak-experience), I initiate the performance and then the experience takes over."

TEMPORARY EXPERIENCE

The peak-experience in sport is a transient experience, it comes and it goes, yet it can always be remembered. Although an individual has a peak-experience, after a time the intensity of the experience subsides and things return to "normal."

TEMPORARY TRANSCENDENCE OF NORMAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SELF

There are seven qualities of the peak-experience that are closely interrelated with each other and contrasted with the normal, everyday characteristics of the self. Each of these qualities contributes to the other qualities in a unique way, and thus they are presented under this one heading of temporary transcendence.

Temporary Transcendence of Self. An essential characteristic of the sport peak-experience is a temporary transgression of self. In this sense, transgression means that the athlete experiences himself in a different manner from the usual one, because in the sport peak-experience there is a harmony, oneness, or totality to the phenomenon that normally does not exist in the experience. A characteristic of this harmony or oneness is the individual's union with an object, himself, or the environment. A cyclist described this harmony: "I am at one with everything. There is no distinction between myself, the bicycle, the track, speed, or anything. There is a oneness with everything." Some athletes talked about it in terms of temporal and spatial changes, whereas others mentioned feelings of oneness, harmony, and being all together. A football player explained: "You forget who you are for a while. I've been so high while doing something that you forget where and who you are? It's as though you're someone else." The athlete is no longer a separate self looking at the world. Rather, he merges with the phenomenon and forms a oneness with the experience.
Total Engrossment. During its duration, the athlete finds himself completely absorbed in the experience. This total immersion results in the athlete centering all his energy, attention, and even his being on the sport experience. When the athlete is consciously thinking about how to catch a football, or the feeling he experiences while catching the ball, he cannot be totally involved with experience, because part of himself remains on the periphery of the experience, cognizing about what is happening and thereby distracting him from the experience. As a football player stated: "I concentrate my whole being on one thing: this is one of the few times I have done this... I am just hitting him (the ball carrier) and nothing else." Once the athlete thinks about the experience, be it execution or feelings, he becomes an object of his experience and thus breaks the union that was formed.

Narrow Focus of Attention. Another aspect of this transcendence, similar to being totally engrossed in the experience, is that during the sport peak-experience the athlete's focus of attention is narrow, and many of the usual thoughts of the athlete such as what is the score or how well he is doing are absent. Thus, the athlete narrows his focus on the sport activity, involves himself in the experience, and is in harmony with it.

The athletes described how they focused their total energy and awareness on the particular movement experience and became an integral part of the activity. A lacrosse player explained: "It is a world within a world—focused right there. I am not aware of the external. My concentration is so great I don't think of anything else."

Everything is Perfect. During the peak-experience in sport, everything is experienced just as it "should" be; all the athletes claimed they would not alter any aspect of the experience. A football player explained: "Everything is right, everything is in line, everything is clicking, nothing is opposing me." It is one of those few times that everything is perfect—nothing distracts the athlete.

Total Control. During the sport peak-experience, the individual is at his or her fullest potential and feels in total control of the situation. All the athletes reported this quality of being in control, however, they discussed it in two different ways. Some athletes felt in control of the situation and made reference to its importance. A swimmer stated: "There was a complete and fluid control of my body. In the last part of the race I was in total control. There was no pain. I was in control of the water and my total bodily actions." This feeling of being at the height of one's power, or invincibility, provides the athlete with a feeling of control over whatever may confront him. A football player revealed: "Things were under control; my body could do anything... it was almost as though my body was not there. Nothing out there could in any way affect me. I could do anything I wanted."

The second way in which the athletes discussed control was explained by a cyclist; "I don't think about it or attempt to control it." It is pertinent to take note that this cyclist experienced a total blackness during his peak-experience. I asked him how he kept his bike on the track if all he observed was blackness, and he explained: "I can just tell where I am... the situation is in control, not me. I experience a freedom in that I do nothing because it is happening." Things are perfect as they are and there is no need to control them. Control in this second sense is more a feeling of being an integral part of the situation and thus consistent and integrated with what is happening, rather than of manipulating or consciously attempting to control the situation.

Total Loss of Fear. Associated with perfection and control is a total loss of fear, particularly fear of failure that is so common in athletics. Because everything is going perfectly and everything is under control there is nothing to fear.

Effortless Movement. Since the individual temporarily transcends himself, the movement becomes effortless. One no longer has to consciously exert oneself, one just moves. 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. It was effortless... I hit him and he just flew. Physically, I didn't put as much as usual into it." During a peak-experience, there is no awareness of the techniques or the pains involved in the moving that the usual self may experience. The athlete does not have to force his movements; he just moves as though something or someone were moving him. If the athlete had to be continuously exerting himself, he would not be able to fuse totally with the experience, because there would always be that segment of his self that would be separated from the whole by continuously providing the motivation.
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 external circumstances. A woman volleyball player addressed this quality when she stated: "The experience is in the process while participating. It sometimes happens that the end result may distract from it, but it remains valid." In all cases, the athlete knew he had had a great experience. Even if the contest or game was lost, the experience itself possessed a beauty, wonder, and uniqueness that made the final score irrelevant.

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 his technique. Unless the athlete has a complete mastery of the basic skills, he will be too preoccupied with the fundamentals to be totally involved 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 should be comfortable with and in control of the fundamental techniques. For example, a beginning skier must be conscious of every shift in body weight and must constantly anticipate the next movement. Only after he no longer has to mentally contrive his next movement can he hope to experience a peak-experience while skiing.

The peak-experience is a subjective event that is unique, involuntary, and transient. At this heightened moment of awareness, the athlete experiences a oneness or union with the activity. With this union is a temporary transcendence of the normal self into an integrated relationship with the experience. The athlete intuitively feels that everything is perfect; the effortless feeling of being in control of the situation pervades the experience. The usual fears and anxieties that may accompany the activity are forgotten and all that matters is the moment and just "doing it."

PERSONAL INSIGHTS

From my exploration of the peak-experience, I have become aware of the further reaches that sport participation may make available to the athlete, and I will share some of the insights that I have gained from this research. What do we mean when we say that someone is a success in sport? So often one's immediate connotation is that the person or team won the game or broke a record. Winning has become the major criterion to measure "success." All you have to do is look at the sport pages in most newspapers to observe this.

A sport participant does not have to be playing at an advanced level of competition or in front of a crowd to have this type of experience. Once an athlete has developed the basic skills that are essential to the activity, he is capable of becoming totally involved in the activity, which is a necessary characteristic for the peak-experience to occur. This experience may happen in any sport activity and at any level of competition, even in a physical education class. This has pertinent implications for coaches, because during the sport peak-experience the athlete's performance may not merit a victory as far as the score or time is concerned, yet the athlete may have a peak-experience in the process of playing and this is a special type of victory that should be acknowledged.

The subjective experience does not necessarily have to approach the intensity of the peak-experience to make it meaningful. I was surprised to discover that most of the athletes I interviewed did not share their greatest moments (in sport) with other people. They could share the winning performance but not the feelings that accompanied it. As a runner stated, "I would have been laughed at by my friends. Maybe a close friend would be able to understand, but it is not too masculine to think of these things."

The subjective domain in sport is frequently neglected by coaches. So often coaches are too busy preparing for the next game to discuss or to make the athlete aware of the subjective domain. They spend hours improving the athlete's performance, but the experiential areas of sport are neglected, and these are the very areas that provide the athlete with his or her own personal meaning. How many times have you been on a team when a period was set aside to discuss the feelings you had while participating? We make fantastic claims about sport being "educational." What can be more educational than the knowledge one gains from the subjective area and the peak-experience specifically? We leave it up to the athlete to determine the ramifications of his experiences in sport. To me this is too important an area to leave to chance. We can encourage athletes to recognize and discuss their subjective experiences just as we help them to improve their performance.
The sport peak-experience provides the athlete with a unique experience in which he accepts his body, his participation, and his movement as one entity. His muscles are no longer perceived as antagonistic, the effortless qualities just take over. Many athletes revealed that their sport peak-experiences provided them with new dimensions to their sport participation and opened new and significant personal knowledge. This is an important part of the educational experience that sport provides. A new type of education is discussed by Frank Goble when he states: "This education will put more emphasis on the development of the person's potential, particularly the potential to be human, to understand the self and others and to relate to them, to achieve the basic human needs, to grow toward self-actualization. This education will help the person to become the best that he is able to become."

The sport experience definitely provides an ambience in which the athlete can reach his fullest potential and develop the human qualities. We can contribute to this understanding by taking the extra time to aid the athlete to explore the subjective domain. Specifically, the peak-experience is one occasion during which the athlete experiences himself to the fullest and gains the personal knowledge that comes with this. Such an experience allows the athlete to understand his capabilities as never before. Not only can an individual benefit from this view of himself as a moving being, but also he may be able to gain personal insight to his potential as a human being outside the realm of sport.

If only athletes could feel comfortable in sharing their subjective experiences with other members of the team, it would help to bring the team together. Such an approach would strengthen team bonds; victory would be one goal and personal expression of a meaningful experience would be another. Traditionally, victory is the major cause for celebration in sport; however, if subjective experiences were regarded as highly as winning, team members would realize the value of their assistance to another person, thereby uniting the team at another level.

From subjective study, one gains insights into the total sport experience. We know that the peak-experience in sport is a unique, transient, nonvoluntary, and transcending phenomenon. As a result of it, the athlete begins to observe new horizons and diverse meanings in the sport experience. Clearly, sport is one domain in which the participants can experience themselves to their fullest possible levels and go on to greater self-knowledge.

REFERENCES