Chapter 32

Qualities of the Peak Experience in Sport

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This chapter focuses on one aspect of the psychological experience that characterizes an athlete's most fulfilling psychoemotional moments while participating in sport. This naturally occurring state of altered consciousness will be referred to as the peak experience. These rare moments, when the participant is performing optimally and experiencing heightened levels of awareness, offer great significance in advancing our understanding of the nature of optimal sport performance.

This chapter will introduce the reader to the phenomenon of the peak experience in sport by examining the major qualities of the peak experience, followed by a discussion of the problems and limitations in studying peak experiences. It will also present the ramifications for educators, coaches, athletes, and psychologists.

THE PHENOMENON OF THE PEAK EXPERIENCE IN SPORT

Humanistic Psychological Tradition

Cultures throughout the world have designated labels for ultimate life experiences that stand out from the usual ebb and flow of daily existence. Scientists, philosophers, and theologians have explored these phenomena in an effort to advance society’s understanding of the human condition. Maslow (1968) introduced the peak experience concept to explain those moments when an individual experiences feelings of total unity, inner strength, and wholeness of being. Maslow was a prime force in the development of humanistic psychology, a school of thought that places considerable emphasis on the healthy aspects of the individual’s personality. Maslow’s theory assumes that each individual has a unique inner nature which is good or neutral, rather than bad. The focus of the humanistic perspective is grounded in the belief that in developing one’s capabilities to the fullest, the person’s inner nature is able to overcome habit and cultural pressure in choosing the life direction most fulfilling for him or her. This enhances the inherent quest for reaching one’s full potential.

Maslow (1968) suggested the term peak experience to describe “those moments of highest happiness and fulfillment,” which are accompanied by loss of fears, inhibitions, and insecurities. He described this experience as an ecstatic, non-voluntary moment of total integration and internal peace.

PEAK EXPERIENCES IN SPORT

Consideration of the athlete's aesthetic experience while participating in sport has emerged only in the last two decades. Sport philosophers
(Arnold, 1979; Metheny, 1968; Slusher, 1967; Weiss, 1969) have speculated that the potential psychological impact of the sport experience lies in the athlete's pursuit of a personal excellence. Ravizza (1975, 1977) and Thomas (1977) have systematically explored the athlete's feelings related to sport participation. These investigations of meaningful moments in sport focused upon the athlete's greatest experience while participating in sport.

A related investigation of peak experience can be found in the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1977), which explored the "flow" experience in the context of play activities. This study focused on the intrinsically rewarding aspect of play in a wide variety of situations, including formal sport activities, to determine whether various play activities have common reward elements. The author hypothesized that by learning what makes leisure activities enjoyable or have flow, it would be possible to decrease dependence on extrinsic rewards in other areas of life. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1977), this "flow experience" is composed of a merging of the player's actions and awareness, centering of higher attention, loss of personal ego, control of personal action and the external environment, demands for action and clear feedback, and an intrinsic reward system. The flow experience has great similarity to the peak experience except that, characteristically, flow is more voluntary in nature.

Murphy's (1978) examination of sport activities specifically resulted in the description of 12 features that contributed to an altered state of consciousness in sport. Murphy (1977) further compared extraordinary psychic events reported by athletes to mystical phenomena.

The remainder of this section will discuss sport peak experiences that this author has studied in order to familiarize the reader with specific qualities of the peak experience (Ravizza, 1975). These investigations have made it clear that although athletes discuss a wide range of feelings that make up their individualized peak experience, the qualities reported fall into one of the three major categories: focused awareness, complete control of self and the environment, and transcendence of self.

In order to experience focused awareness, the athlete must develop sufficient concentration to exclude external variables (e.g., crowd) that may negatively affect performance. Control of self and the environment denots a dimension in which the athlete experiences an internal power over his or her own movements and the obstacles that the game or contest presents. Finally, transcendence of self captures the concept that the athlete is being directed by the power of the merged self and the movement experience.

Intrinsic Satisfaction that sport participation can provide. Peak experiences during an athlete's career are relatively rare but their intensity acts as a standard, or qualitative reference point, for subjectively evaluating future performance.

The nature of the peak experience characteristically includes three common traits which are not subject to specific intervention techniques. Athletes always report the experience as temporary, nonvoluntary, and unique. Thus, the experience never produces a lasting enhanced mental state and no known available method can pinpoint its occurrence. Yet, when the peak experience does happen it stands apart from the usual game experience or practice routine.

As a precondition to a peak experience the athlete must achieve a mastery of the basic skills. This prerequisite is met when the athlete need no longer think about technical elements of skill execution. It is important to point out that circumstances or the sport environment need not be extraordinary in order for a peak experience to occur. The uniqueness lies in the way that one experiences the phenomenon. For example, a championship victory or a national record are not necessarily unique experiences. It is the quality of uniqueness that makes the participant regard the experiences as a personal treasure, greater than any trophy. The following section should expand our understanding of the components that commonly comprise the peak experience.

Focused Awareness

Every athletic contest has potential distractions that inhibit optimal performance by distracting the athlete's attention from the appropriate focal point. During the peak experience, the athlete's concentration is so immersed in the activity that the mental focus automatically adjusts to the task-relevant cues. The height of this focused awareness is manifested by complete absorption in the movement task and frequently includes altered perceptions about time, space, and the quality of the experience.

A lacrosse player captured the essence of this focused awareness when she said, "It was a world within a world... focused right there. I was not aware of the external. My concentration was so great I didn't think of anything else" (Ravizza, 1977, p. 38).

Centered Present Focus. During the peak experience, all consciousness is channeled into the present moment. Control is exercised over movement while the athlete fully lives the experience. Mental energy is not wasted dwelling on past or future actions over which there is no control. Centered focus is an internal physical and mental preparation made that initially produces a balanced perspective. A woman gymnast reports, "Right before I start, I totally block out various distractions. It's as if things are melting away... I think of the routine as a whole and it is
just there and I am doing it" (Ravizza, 1982, p. 10). Thus, a relationship between the athlete and the movement task is created. For example, the high jumper prepares internally by stretching and adjusting his/her body position. After this ritual is completed the focus of attention shifts entirely to the bar, clearing all past thoughts and future distractions. At this point the athlete is centered on the high jump, ready to execute the movement.

Narrow Focus of Attention. In the midst of the peak experience the most exclusive kind of visual perceiving, listening, or feeling exists. Attention focuses appropriately upon the object of perception. The athlete observes from a nonjudging, nonclassifying perspective that heightens the viewing of the object in its entirety. This experience permits the athlete to shift instantly in response to movement cues. A football player discusses his experience of a narrow focus as follows: "This is one time I concentrated my whole being on one thing . . . I am just hitting him [the ball carrier] and nothing else" (Ravizza, 1977, p. 38).

Complete Absorption. In contrast to routine activities, the sport environment creates an environment that augments the individual's ability to be totally involved in the task at hand. In the peak experience context the competitor who concentrates intensely is surrounded by a state of silence where external concerns do not intrude. The focus is on execution of the appropriate movement task. The conduct of the crowd or previous playing errors are physical or mental distractions that are not part of the athlete's consciousness. A gymnast experiences complete absorption in the following manner: "It is just me and the routine; there is a complete silence. I forget time and just totally get into it . . . It is strange because it is just me and the beam. I am so into it that I do not notice anything else" (Ravizza, 1982, p.9). Closely linked with this quality of intense concentration are different types of altered perceptions, the occurrence of which varies widely among athletes. There are at least three areas in which discernible variations from the usual movement perceptions are experienced: (a) the quality of the experience, (b) time disorientation, and (c) spatial alteration.

The quality of the athlete's perceived experience is heightened in that there is a quicker and clearer focus on movement cues. The athlete experiences a sense of awe and wonder with the quality of the experience. The perception may be so rich as to include temporal and spatial changes. Time disorientation is manifested in one of two ways. For example, an entire event or segment of it might seem to slip by in the briefest of moments. On the other hand, a few seconds in time may be perceived as endless slow motion. Spatial alteration occurs in the perception of equipment, the field, and/or opposing players. Thus, the baseball player may perceive the ball as moving in slow motion and seeming larger than usual. The gymnast may perceive the width of the balance beam as wider than its objective measurements. In contrast, when an athlete is under extreme stress and lacks control of the situation, objects appear faster or sometimes smaller than usual. An extreme example of this occurs when an athlete becomes so tense that he/she hardly perceives anything (tunnel vision).

Complete Control of Self and the Environment

To reach specific goals in competitive situations, the athlete's dual concern is to learn to master the self and work to control the situation. The intensity of the peak experience pushes the athlete to new levels of performance in the pursuit of these goals. There is a fusion between the perfect nature of the movement and the willingness to dispense with the usual caution of not making an error. The athlete is in charge of the situation. A football player's report of his feelings of control demonstrates the individual's ultimate exercise of psychological power: "Things were under control; my body could do anything . . . it was almost like my body was not there. Everything out there could in no way affect me. I could do anything I wanted" (Ravizza, 1975, p.402). This sense of control acts as a guide for the athlete as though each movement is choreographed in advance.

Perfection. Athletes describe the peak experience as euphoric, memorable, and worthwhile, an event complete in itself and independent from all external circumstances. The experience of a perfect moment leads the athlete to an understanding of intrinsic satisfaction and therefore becomes a self-validating moment. A downhill skier captured this feeling of perfection with the following statement: "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" (Ravizza, 1975, p.399). Comment or congratulations from a coach, another player, or spectators becomes unnecessary because the perfect quality of the experience is irrefutable and frequently transcends the final, even losing, score.

Loss of Fear. Physical injury and emotional fear in sport are learned from past injuries, prior mistakes in performance, and critical comments from significant others. Furthermore, many athletes are trained to be too critical of their performance. Athletes often approach competition with an orientation toward the fear of making mistakes. In contrast, during peak experiences one strives for excellence, undaunted by past mistakes and the dangers inherent in the sport. There is no doubt
that more frequent injuries and mental errors will happen to the athlete whose primary motivation is to avoid mistakes. Persistent fear of failure reduces the athlete's ability to achieve total concentration because a part of his or her consciousness is distracted in evaluating ongoing performance. An athlete cannot be totally absorbed in the task while at the same time trying to avoid mistakes.

Transcendence of Self. Athletes who are totally involved in the present, centered on the task, and feeling at the height of their power may experience harmony or oneness with the movement. Such an experience can be called transcendence of self. Athletes simply do the appropriate task without consciously thinking about it. To reach this level of intensity the athlete must surrender the usual thinking-evaluating self to the experience. The initial motivation is provided by going all out. Total involvement sets the conditions for the peak experience. The athlete has no further control over whether a feeling of harmony will be reached.

Harmony and Oneness. Harmony and oneness represent a mental state in which the athlete's total self is integrated physically and mentally in the experience. The objects of perception (implements of the game) are experienced as an intimate part of the self. There is no distinction between the individual and the experience; instead, the two flow together in a unified whole. No longer are muscles fighting muscles, no longer is the athlete fighting the environment; now there is a blending of all levels between one's self, the movement, and/or the team. An Olympic cyclist describes his feelings of integration as follows: "I am at one with everything. There is no distinction between myself, the bicycle, track, speed or anything. There is a oneness with everything" (Ravizza, 1975, p. 402).

Noncritical and Effortless. In order for harmony to occur, the athlete must be able to execute the basic skills automatically. If one consciously criticizes ongoing performance then part of the self is not totally immersed in the activity. Rather, it is involved in giving performance commands. As the athlete learns to surrender the self to the experience, he or she becomes increasingly aware of moving toward harmony. The intense enjoyment and intrinsic satisfaction often involved with the transcendence experience demands that the athlete let the feelings occur without stopping to dwell on or evaluate them.

The athlete has to surrender him/herself to the experience. It is as if the athlete could continue moving forever, no longer having to exert himself/herself consciously. A butterfly swimmer captures the blending of self and the experience that occurs with the following comment: "I couldn't feel any pain, which is really weird, for me... take away the pain and it is effortless... my whole body was doing it with ease" (Ravizza, 1975, p. 403). In team sports, the feeling of harmony may be experienced when each of the individuals involved blend together to form a synergy that is greater than any individual effort. Each individual feels the team "clicking," and there is a concentration and rhythm that wasn't there before.

A skier's comments summarize the three major categories that comprise a peak experience:

Everything was so perfect, everything was so right, that it couldn't be any other way. The closest thing I can say about it was that there seemed to be tracks in the snow that my skis made to fit in... It was no longer me and the hill, but it was both of us.
It was just right. I belonged there. (Ravizza, 1975, p. 399)

CONSIDERATIONS IN EXAMINING PEAK EXPERIENCES IN SPORT

Having examined the basic features of the peak experience in the previous section, the reader might find it helpful to pause and consider the nature of the investigations used to study this type of psychological phenomenon. To date, researchers investigating peak experience have relied primarily on a two-step research strategy, the first step involving detailed athlete interviews which described this psychological phenomenon. In the second step, the researcher rigorously analyzed the content of the interviews and attempted to extract its major characteristics.

The one potential weakness of this technique is that it relies on the athlete's accurate recall and description of the phenomenon as well as the researcher's skill and integrity in objectively ascertaining the major features of the phenomenon under study. This type of phenomenological technique for studying psychological experience works best when used as a preliminary research technique, followed by behavioristic measures such as standardized psychological inventories. An investigation using more traditional methods to evaluate altered states of consciousness is underway at present, but no conclusions have yet been published (Adair, 1982).

To the coach, athlete, and researcher, the phenomenon of peak experience often appears at first glance to be unrelated to everyday practice and performance. Consequently, many people in sport have considered the peak experience as a rare and irrelevant, although interesting, phenomenon. The focus of the author's present research is that the peak experience may constitute a distant point of a continuum of normal sport experience. Thus, a detailed analysis of its characteristics may provide important clues to the nature of intervening points along the same continuum.
The peak experience is a valuable glimpse into a higher state of consciousness that many athletes have not yet experienced or described. At present, the significance of the peak experience in sport lies in the experience itself and also in the investigation of whether greater personal fulfillment in sport increases the likelihood of improved performance levels.

A second methodological consideration that may retard research in this area is that such a highly subjective, complex, psychological phenomenon requires much of the researcher's time, effort, and care. When dealing with relatively unfamiliar aspects of consciousness, the investigator will need a great deal of patience because he or she needs to create an interviewing environment that encourages spontaneity while balancing the need to keep the interview focused.

THE USE OF PEAK EXPERIENCE TO IMPROVE OPTIMAL LEVELS OF PERFORMANCE

One way in which modern researchers have conceptualized the whole notion of optimal performance is to characterize performance as an inverted-U function (Landers, 1980; Mariens & Landers, 1970). Peak experience may enhance performance because it lends insight into the nature of the athlete's consciousness while he/she is performing at an optimal level. It then becomes a matter of duplicating selected aspects of these experiences, thereby setting up the psychological foundation necessary for consistent and optimal levels of performance. For example, one aspect of the peak experience is focused awareness of what is occurring at the moment. Athletes can become more sensitive to this heightened awareness by employing relaxation, breathing, and centering techniques. Specialists (Nideffer & Deckner, 1979; Orlick, 1980; Ralio & Unestahl, 1979; Ravizza & Rotella, 1982; Suinn, 1972) currently working with athletes have employed these techniques effectively in developing focused awareness and control over self and the environment in order to set the conditions for optimal performance. Whether or not a transcendental experience will occur from this is beyond our knowledge or control at the present time.

Obviously, exploration of psychological as well as physical performance requires an increased rapport between the coach and players, and between the athletes themselves. Ultimately such open-ended rapport can be useful both on and off the field. For example, when athletes share their pregame anxiety with the coach and their teammates, some of their tension will be relieved because they are no longer nourishing the illusion of being in control. They no longer need to waste energy in pretending all is well.

Finally, the peak experience is an intrinsic experience that is self-validating. It is vital for the athlete to have some internal feelings of value rather than to rely only on the evaluation of significant others, coaches, or teammates. The peak experience teaches the athlete an awareness of his/her own significance independent of what others have to say. Athletes gradually realize more of their inner beauty as they recognize the wealth of potential that they possess. Reflection upon the peak experience contributes to an awareness of the "ultimate athlete" (Leonard, 1975) within, thereby adding to the athlete's self-confidence.

SUMMARY

Like any altered state of consciousness, the peak experience is a difficult phenomenon to study. Yet it has tremendous potential significance for the achievement of optimal performance in sport. We cannot guarantee peak experiences, but their occurrence gives intrinsic satisfaction and acts as a valuable reference point in the achievement of performance goals. Athletes need to develop a fuller awareness of their sport experiences in order to gain control over the self and the sport environment. As coaches and researchers, we can help the athlete develop along a path that permits each to attain his or her fullest capabilities.