ZONE OF OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE

– "ZONING" –

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Introduction to Zone of Optimal Performance

The story of the "bird-berries" and the "low hanging fruit"

Adults are always telling younger people and athletes to reach for the stars. Then, in the next sentence, we tell them to find the "low-hanging fruit", the ones that are easiest to reach. This doesn't make sense.

Above the low hanging fruit, the ones we always pick, are the berries that are hard for us to reach. These berries at the top of the bush get the most sun so they are the juiciest. They are the ***bird-berries***. Rather than just reaching out and grabbing the low hanging fruit, it is the bird-berries that we should be striving to enjoy. Why? What we learn about ourselves when we reach for the bird-berries is eternally more valuable than when we settle for the low hanging fruit.

Now, here is the secret … the berries at the top of the bush are actually ***NOT*** the goal. They are NOT the zone you're looking for. No … on your way to the bird-berries, you can be munching away on delicious berries the whole way up the berry bush. You can call it, "*consistently enjoying the fruits of your labour!*" You're **ZONING!**

"THAT IS YOUR ZONE OF OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE"

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Definition of Zone of Optimal Performance

You are in the zone when you are showing yourself improvements from previous practices or matches, you are literally a better athlete than the previous day, all due to your dedicated effort and commitment. It is a zone or state that actively is NOT trying to reach some far-off perfection. Instead, it is:

- **The ability to experience joy and pride in the moment** as progress is made towards the top
- **Understanding there can always be more progress** toward the top, but remaining fully engaged in the joy of the challenge and growth of the moment
- **Appreciating that your opponent,** or opposing team, is a crucial partner in you getting into your zone
- **Actively welcoming the opposition's challenge** because you believe in yourself

Then, from this mental state, you are in a position to act within competition in ways that enhance performance. These actions include:

- **Relaxed muscles and body** (no tightness), performing without anxiety, but with a high degree of focus
- **Performing at the "pitch"** that suits your most enjoyable performance – for some it is about being intense and pumped up; for others it is about being level with your emotions while being fully tuned in to the competitive moment. It is NEVER about being anxious or fearful in ways that cause strain on your body's fluidity, lack of clear thinking, and inability to stay in the present
- **Performing for its own sake,** rather than just to try and win or not lose
- **Occasionally performing in ways that seem effortless,** without thought or self-consciousness (often called flow)

Single moments of incredibly rare and almost flawless performance clearly offer an unreasonable return on your effort. It is laughable that we should train, endure hardship, struggle, fail, win, and lose, all with the sole pursuit of moments of perfect performance. Seriously? EVERY athlete can get better, do better, play better, so that prize of rare perfection is a fool's errand. Nobody's perfect, as they say.

No, INSTEAD, being in the Zone is NOT about chasing success...

"ZONING" IS ABOUT SUCCESS CHASING YOU

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How do I frequently enter my Zone of Optimal Performance?

3 CRITICAL STEPS

Before we get started, please first consider the win-lose scenario of sport? Consider the **PREDATOR & THE PREY** … The predator doesn't hate its prey. They evolve together. If the prey gets away, what happens? The predator learns. In the same way, your opponent(s) are CRUCIAL to your ability to be in the Zone of Optimal Performance. The better they play, the more your solutions are tested. The more you LEARN. No such thing as "win-lose scenarios" … only "win-learn scenarios".

When you can learn to find joy in this process, and when you actively welcome this challenge … YOU ARE ZONING!

STEP 1. In the Weeks Leading up to a Tournament

1. Allow time and space to learn and practice without outcome-pressures. Periodization is critical to developing time for learning, performing, and reflecting. You can do this yourself, or work with a coach or Dr. Petersen as a specialized Performance Psychologist.
2. Use a journal to write your commitment to welcoming opposition and challenge, putting the goal of winning above all else behind you. Put success behind you; put the joy of performing with your opposition right in front of you.
3. Determine your personal "pitch". Athletes have an emotional pitch range that suits their most enjoyable performance—from intense and pumped up, to calm, loose, and in steady control. Build clarity by journaling this information.
4. **Active Rehearsal via Visualization:**
    - Picture IN THE PRESENT TENSE, welcoming one another's great performance
    - See your opponent testing your abilities and see yourself actively welcoming it
    - See yourself adapting and responding using skills, triggers, and routines
    - See yourself smiling after misses, instantly bouncing forward to the next moment
    - Regulate your pitch: Activate UP with explosive movements and phrases like "here we go"; Deactivate DOWN with 3-count controlled breathing and calming phrases like "my body knows what to do"

STEP 2. During Competition

1. Actively trigger yourself away from outcome anxiety, fear of failure, or negativity, replacing those thoughts with phrases that bring you back to the present and wanting the challenge.
2. Get to your optimal "pitch" by using your rehearsed routines to activate yourself UP or deactivate yourself DOWN as the moment demands.

How do I assess my progress? – STEP 3. Following Competition

Take out your journal and reflect upon your performance across these four core questions:

1. Did you follow through with your commitment to welcoming both the opposition and the challenge?
2. Did you believe in yourself, or did you operate out of a fear of losing?
3. Did you put the joy of performing with your opposition right in front of you, and put the pressure of winning behind you?
4. What was your emotional state, your "pitch"? Did you need to activate yourself UP or deactivate yourself DOWN?

Then you repeat the cycle—approached with joy, excitement, and relentless commitment.

GOOD LUCK !

If you need assistance with developing your zone or pitch, please email me at:
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