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Peak performance – a unifying model

Athletes attain peak performance when they combine their physical and mental capabilities to produce an exceptional performance, that is, a performance exceeding typical ability and reflecting the best that the athlete can currently achieve. Peak performance is thus relative. Although it depends upon each athlete's present ability, it requires a minimum standard of physical conditioning and competence in physical skills. Athletes are more likely to achieve a peak performance when the demands or challenges match their ability. Peak performance is something to which most athletes and coaches devote countless hours and strive towards. Unfortunately, peak performance is relatively rare and many athletes wrongly view its occurrence as involuntary. Four different research paradigms have examined a wide variety of athletes' peak performances and have uncovered consistent psychological characteristics that underlie those performances.

One such paradigm involved researchers asking athletes to recall their subjective experiences when they were playing at their best. A second paradigm had researchers compare the psychological characteristics of successful to less successful athletes, for example, a comparison of Olympic qualifiers to non-qualifiers. A third design had researchers compare the emotional states of individual athletes that were associated with their better and worse performances, thus discovering *individualized zones of optimal functioning. In the fourth paradigm, researchers asked top scouts, sport psychologists, coaches, and athletes what they believed it takes to be a successful athlete.

Results derived from the previous research paradigms suggest that, even though many individual variations exist, an ideal mind-body state seems to be associated with peak performance. When an athlete experiences this ideal mind-body state and the resulting peak performance experience, he or she is in *flow. We note, however, that one can experience a flow state and not be having a peak performance. Sport psychologists assume the presence of the right psychological climate helps elicit the physiological reactions necessary to performing at one's best. A certain psychological profile did emerge for most peak performances, regardless of the research paradigm used or the sport studied.

The peak performance profile contains many elements. An optimal *arousal and activation is necessary so that athletes feel energized, relaxed, and free of anxiety. Peak performers tend to have high *self-confidence and experience no fear. They have better concentration. Attending to

appropriate cues is imperative for peak performance in that athletes are able to maintain appropriate focus by resisting distractions and attending to pertinent information. Peak performers feel in control. They are not forcing the performance. It feels automatic and effortless. Additionally, these individuals have a positive preoccupation with sport by maintaining facilitative *self-talk, for example 'I can do it' or 'keep up the intensity', and imagery, for example seeing themselves performing correctly. Finally, determination and commitment to succeed in their sport typically underlie an athlete's attainment of peak performances.

Although adequate cause-and-effect data are lacking, there probably is a bi-directional relationship between peak performance and optimal mental states, in that possession of the previously mentioned psychological characteristics leads to better performance, just as success enhances these desirable characteristics. A clearer understanding of what can lead to peak performance has come from researchers who have identified the psychological skills and mental preparation strategies used by successful elite athletes. Many top performers have learned how to voluntarily elicit peak performance by using the strategies and interventions described in the entry on *preparation for peak performance.

Further Reading

Williams, J.M. and Krane, V. (2001) 'Psychological characteristics of peak performance', in J.M. Williams (ed) *Applied Sport Psychology: Personal Growth to Peak Performance*, 162-178, New York: McGraw-Hill.

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