

2016

POSITIVE
PERFORMANCE
ACADEMY

The Positive Performance Academy

Founder & CEO Denis Hevey



ESCALATING THE EDGE OF EXCELLENCE: FINDING FLOW

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi first discovered Flow in the 80's after experimenting on a large subject of diverse professionals from different parts of the world. Today, we have learnt to adapt this science to athletes in competitive sports, leading to optimal human functionality.

"Flow" is a term psychologists use to refer to conscious states in which we are completely immersed in what we are doing. The term 'flow' was given to these states by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who is a world renowned psychological expert on 'optimal experiences'. He first became interested in the subject state when researching what makes people happy, how they achieve it, and what makes life worth living.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his team of researchers began investigating this phenomenon in the 1980's. They travelled to dozens of countries all over the world, researching people from all walks of life, whether they were a ballerina or a farmer, and asked them all the same question - "what makes you happy?" They all reported the same feelings of absorption in what they were doing, and the happiness that followed. This led Csikszentmihalyi to the conclusion that flow states are universal, and could be experienced by anyone, so long as the activity they were doing was internally motivating.

He later explained Flow as follows;

"You are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you almost don't exist. I have experienced this time and time again. My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what is happening. I just sit there watching in a state of awe and wonderment.

And the music just flows out by itself."

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 44)

Flow can be compared to being 'in the zone'. When we are in flow states, we perform at our best, effortlessly. Flow can occur in many situations. For instance, you could be in flow when writing an academic article, running a marathon, or simply being absorbed in a conversation with friends.

Regardless of what you are doing, when in a flow state, you are so concentrated on the task at hand that the rest of the world seems to just pass us by. This is a thoroughly enjoyable experience for us. It may

be surprising given how pleasurable 'flow' is for us, but in these states we are actually at our most productive.

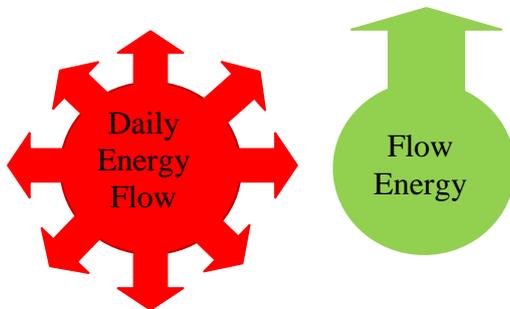


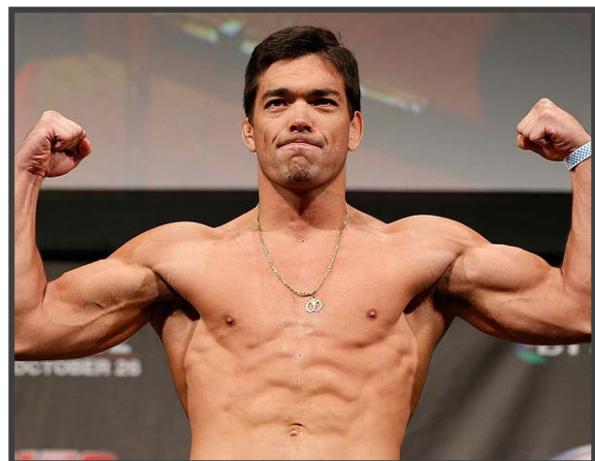
Figure 2.1 {Flow Energy}

Intense concentration allows us to apply purposeful focus to what we want to achieve. Unfortunately, this is something we rarely allow ourselves to have. Think back over the day you had, how many times did you stop what you were doing to answer the phone or reply to an email? All of these activities break our concentration and prevent us from reaching our Flow state. In this evolutionary world that we live in, this are an increasing amount of distractions surrounding us, making Flow exceptionally rare and Flip-Flopping the norm, losing as much as 3 hours of productive time each day.

This article will take a look into the element of Flow in competitive sports

and how Flow coaching can help develop hyper-focused mind-sets for athletes, leading to optimal functionality. Within this text, the theoretical science of Flow will be applied to both Tennis and Golf with the use of empirical evidence from athletes previously involved with the Positive Performance Academy©.

In addition to Csikszentmihalyi, there are many honorable people in the world that are advocates for the science of Flow. These people include Timothy Gallwey, author of 'Inner Game', Late Formula One driver Ayrton Senna, and also mixed martial arts (MMA) champion Lyoto Machida. Machida meditates before every one of his fights to reach a level of Mushin, a concept that is, in all respects, equal to flow.



FLOW IN SPORT

Many studies have discussed 'Being in the Zone' in sport. This is known as 'Flow' or, in other words, 'Ideal Performance State, IPS'. This refers to the moment a person reaches an optimum level of arousal whereby brain focus is sharpened to the extent that an individual is fully engaged in what they are doing moment to moment. This state-of-mind can be compared to hyperfocus, the experience of deep and intense concentration in people with ADHD.

Being capable of adapting to such a complex mind-set has multiple benefits, particularly for athletes, including;

CONTROL

Often called '*Inner-Life Control*' where our attention and concentration is developed to a level that serves our aspirations best. This is first reliant on *will-power*, which with time and deliberate practice leads to less demanding *way-power* i.e. good habits.

EXPERIENCE

The body, mind, heart and soul are in a strong alliance in developing our expertise and mastery of what we desire. We have the Practice, Precision, Passion and Purpose aligned to what we actually do. This experience will be the stepping stone to serial success.

OUTPUT PRODUCTIVITY

Less input for more output. Energy is harnessed and focused on project productivity only and not expended in distractors of internal conflict, decision making, self-regulation, self-consciousness, compensation, control and self-discipline.

SELF-REFLECTION

In a deep state of Flow we have two minds, the *Thinking Mind* and the *Reflective Mind*.

The Thinking Mind has the ability to be hyper active with up to 3 thoughts a second, however due to early life conditioning; this is a very rare

“PERCEIVE, BELIEVE, ACHIEVE”

The Positive Performance Academy m: +353 86 251 7147 t: +353 45 483 982

info@positivityireland.com www.positiveperformanceacademy.com

www.facebook.com/pages/Positivity-Ireland/ <https://twitter.com/DenisHeveyP2P>

occurrence. As a result this element of the mind is mostly dominated by fear, uncertainty and self-doubt (FUD Mind). This expends limited energy needlessly when we attempt to suppress or control our thinking. This needs to be managed not suppressed by the the development of *Reflective Mind* which is dominant in the Flow state.

The Reflective Mind or sometimes called the '*Observation Mind* is like any muscle. It must be developed and used in order to stay strong. It is based on the philosophy of "*Unconditional Positive Regard*" and it calms the internal critic of the thinking mind which generates confidence and reassurance.

Flow states develop a very complex and non-judgemental *Reflective Mind*. This is an extremely powerful advantage of Flow.

So how can these benefits translate to an athlete? The real question is how they cannot. Athletes compete in numerous trials, tests, competitions,

and tournaments throughout their lifetime. With the help of positive psychology and the benefits of Flow, an athlete can improve faster, perform better, increase levels of consistency, enhance focus, and reflect better, while staying positive and energised throughout.

Many studies have been undergone on the relationship between Flow and success in sports, including the study conducted by Jackson, et al (1998), '*Psychological correlates of flow in sport*'. The study was carried out on a sample of 398 non-elite athletes competing in a World Masters Games in Australia in the 90's. Cyclists, triathletes, swimmers, and track and field athletes were all examined in the experiment and it was concluded that there was a direct correlation between Flow and the perceived ability of athletes. It was also found that there was a strong relationship between Flow and the anxiety and motivation felt by athletes during competitions. Senses of anxiety would decrease and motivation would increase. (Jackson et al, 1998). (See Fig.5.1)

Other similar studies include Jackson's (1996), 'Toward a Conceptual Understanding of the Flow Experience in Elite Athletes', twenty-eight elite athletes were examined with regards to their beliefs and interpretations of flow state during the performance of their sport. The sample of athletes highlighted the benefits involved in getting into a flow-state while competing. The qualitative research found some particular dimensions of flow to be more dominant than others for the athletes, namely autotelic experience of flow (passion skills), lack of distraction on the task at hand, merging of action and awareness for a single-focus attention, and a sense of control.

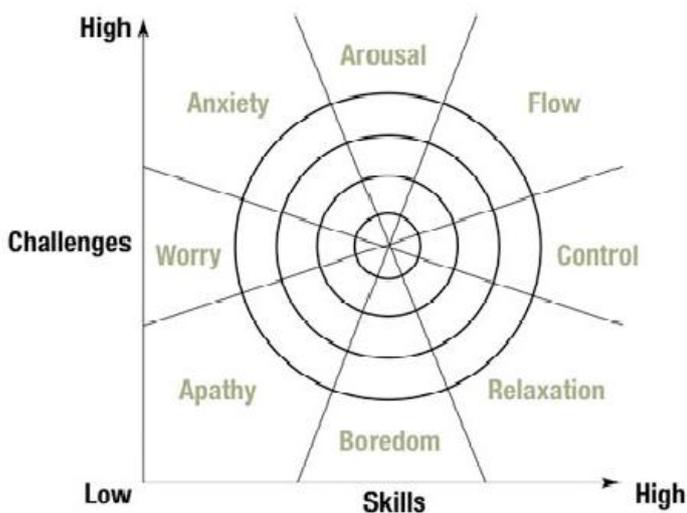


Figure 5.1 {Path to Flow}

Flow is to athletes as a roof is to a house. A roof can finalize a house and make it a home just like flow can bring an athlete to the next level in terms of skills, confidence, and mind-to-body relations. With the Flow State Scale Csikszentmihalyi found it possible to outline the profile of optimal functioning of individuals or work-groups under 9 dimensions. At the Positive Performance Academy© we like to expand that to 10 dimensions as follows:

CLEAR GOALS

The entrance in a state of flow requires clear, realistic and measurable goals.

DIRECT AND IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK

Feedback is immediate yet highly necessary in order to continue in Flow. During Flow we need a clear channel of feedback communication as to how we are performing against the goal, our set standard.

CHALLENGE AND SKILL BALANCE

Flow requires a balance between the perception of task difficulty and individual capacities. This leads into the 4% Guidance Rule of goal-setting.

MERGING ACTION & AWARENESS

Attention and concentration requires energy which is a limited resource. This energy is critical for optimal brain activity, which can consume up to 20% of one's available energy. Limited energy resources are squandered daily and are seriously diluted when you are not fully focused on the task in hand or Ideal Performance States (IPSS) will not be achieved.

CONCENTRATION OVER DISTRACTION

Pin Point Progress requires nothing less than Fine Point Focus. Time for the 'Do Not Disturb' sign.

SENSE OF CONTROL

The flow experience is typically described as involving a sense of control - or, more precisely, as lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of sport, e.g. getting the yips in golf.

EGOLESS STATE [LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS]

Ego does not exist in Flow experiences but rather deep humility based on authentic competence and confidence to perform the task set

for the flow experience. This accesses one's ability to focus on the goal without worrying about the opinions of others.

DISTORTION OF SENSE OF TIME

The sense of time is altered. Hours and minutes can seem accelerated or slowed down. . There is no time management but time intelligence. Every moment is in focus and every moment counts and output or productivity is enhanced.

AUTOTELIC [PASSION SKILLS]

There is a vocation-like devotion to the task. On the motivation continuum it is at the extreme intrinsic end of a task that one "loves to do" rather than the extrinsic feeling of should do have to do. - *"I love hitting the ball"* – Novak Djokovic

RESILIENCE

While in a Flow state there is little use for resilience because 'sticking to task' is a natural state of Flow.

However, getting into the zone, particularly after adverse set-backs requires a rich reservoir of resilience.

At the Positive Performance Academy© we had the privilege to work with some excellent up-and-coming youth athletes in Golf, Tennis, Rugby, Combat sports, and other fields. One particularly special athlete we had the pleasure of working with was Ireland's youth golf prodigy, Jack Hume.

Jack came to the Positive Performance Academy© after hitting a plateau in his golfing game. He was under the assumption that this was due to his mentality about the game and he was simply losing focus and losing hope. After over a year of coaching, Jack has made some great strides with Mental Muscle Mastery and we are hopeful for a bright future for this young star.



Jack Hume
21yrs Old
Naas, Ireland
Top Irish Amateur Golfer

Jack became only the 2nd player in Irish History to win all four provincial titles In Ireland in 2011. He was a part of Ireland's winning Home Internationals team in 2014 and also won 2 individual titles during 2014, the West of Ireland and the Nassau Invitational. Other notable finishes include 2nd in 2014 Scottish Amateur and 3rd in the Miami Invitational. Jack is pictured above playing in the Walker Cup earlier this year.

"Having the ideal mindset and being in Flow is an intricate part of my game. Thanks to the Positive Performance Academy, I have developed the mental side of my golf more than I'd ever imagined." – Jack Hume

Another advocate for intense focus and flow in sports is Novak Djokovic, who has recently spoken out to Peter Aspden (2015) of the Financial Times about his hunger for the sport and how he consistently gets 'in the zone'. The Autotelic Dimension of Flow states that one must love what they're doing in order to maximize focus. Djokovic told the Financial Times, "I can carry on playing at this level because I like hitting the tennis ball". After reaching a Flow State, a sports person can reach superhuman levels of endurance and can be "more alert, more aware, more energetic".

At the Positive Performance Academy©, we believe that Flow should be introduced to any athlete or team that wants to reach the next level of heightened performance. Flow supports the movement towards Optimal Human Functionality©. In a deeply focused mind-set, athletes can become more physically intelligent and more mentally capable of achievement than they have ever been previously.

REFERENCES

Aspden, Peter. *What's it like to be the world's number one tennis player?* The Financial Times, 17-18 October, 2015, 3.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper & Row, (1), 1990.

Hevey, Denis. *Flow Workshop: The Essence Optimisation*. November 2015

Jackson, Susan A. *Toward a Conceptual Understanding of the Flow Experience in Elite Athletes*. Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, Vol 67(1), 1996, 76-90.

Jackson, Susan A.; Kimiecik, Jay C.; Ford, Stephen K.; Marsh, Herbert W. *Psychological correlates of flow in sport*. Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, Vol 20(4), Dec 1998, 358-378.
