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Cycling in the Zone

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the concept of being in the zone as it applies to cycling. It questions how a cyclist can be in the zone, and how it might differ from the experience of athletes in other sports. There is an abundance of literature about playing in the zone, in the flow, optimal experience, and peak performance for athletes in many sports. However, research is minimal or non-existent on the experiences of cyclists and the zone. There are numerous definitions of playing in the zone, and these experiences are undoubtedly unique and individual, both to the athlete and to the sport. How do cyclists experience the zone? This paper will focus on endurance and suffering as a zone, or precursor to the zone experience, which may explain how cyclists in grueling and competitive long-distance races can endure to the finish line. This discussion will emphasize the performance and experiences of the professional athlete in cycling sports.

Introduction

The experience of an athlete in competition has both physical and mental components. We recognize and admire the physical abilities and skills that the athlete has acquired, the years of training, the triumphs and the defeats. But there is also another component, the spiritual and psychological dimensions involved in sports. The meaning of sport to an individual athlete varies widely: from financial gain, to glory, to pursuit of a personal best, or to setting a world record. Whatever the extrinsic motivation might be, some athletes report experiencing a state of focused energy, or a transcendent state of well being, or an altered sense of time, or being "on a high." These intrinsic, rewarding moments are often difficult to describe, but enhance the athletic performance and contribute to the sense of self-mastery, optimal performance, and the spiritual experience in sports. Andrew Cooper (1998) wrote Playing in the Zone to explore the spiritual and metaphysical impact that sport has on our inner lives. Murphy and White first published In the Zone in 1978, from their investigation of transcendent experience in sport.

This paper asks if it is possible, while suffering the constant pain that elite cyclists endure, for these cyclists to enter a zone that we have not previously considered? A zone

that allows the cyclist to continue against great odds and overcome injuries, pain and fatigue to finish a race. A zone that does not include the "high" that is present in some other sports.

Differing Perceptions of the Zone

Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, (1999) give testimonial quotes from an elite cyclist named "Simon," who experienced the phenomena of flow, or optimal performance while on the "tour," finishing the grueling race with a 7k climb:

"I was totally absorbed, 110 percent; that was all that mattered in the whole existence. It just amazed me how I could maintain such high concentration for three hours. I'm used to having my mind wander, especially under pressure. My body felt great. Nothing, you feel like just nothing can go wrong and there's nothing that will be able to stop you or get in your way. And you're ready to tackle anything, and you don't fear any possibility happening, and it's just exhilarating. Afterward, I couldn't come down, I was on a high. I felt like I wanted to go ride, ride up that hill again (p.9).

While Simon's ride is a wonderful example of the flow state, this does not seem to be the experience of most elite cyclists in world championship events. Time and time again, their interviews indicate a state of intense pain and suffering during the race. Miguel Indurain, twice winner of the Tour de France, and the Giro d'Italia said, "Everybody tells me that I never look as if I'm suffering. But, when I watch videotapes of a race, I always remember the pain I had to endure" (Abt, 1993, p. 18). Ron Kiefel, team captain for Motorola, said, "Your body hurts, your lungs hurt, you're breathing as hard as you can, you don't feel you can squeeze any more power out of your legs, and you're just trying to settle down and get in a good rhythm" (Abt, 1993, p.62). Chris Boardman described Stage 21 of the 1996 Tour De France as "suffering for eight hours...the most unpleasant experience I've ever had" (Abt, 1997, p.124).

Experiencing the Zone

The zone has been described as a spiritual experience, a transcendent state, going beyond the self, a mystical experience with exceptional feats of strength and endurance. Some refer to the zone as an exhilarating, uplifting event, with a sense of mastery and control, or a sense of invincibility. Murphy and White(1995) wrote about the phenomena of mystical moments and extraordinary functioning in sports and called it the "spiritual underground" (p.1) They described extraordinary feats such as exceptional energy, extraordinary strength, speed and endurance where athletes rise to a level of performance that seems impossible, almost superhuman (pp.74-84).

The runner' high is the well know and most recognized example of peak moments or being in the zone. Sachs (1984) describes the runner' high as, "A euphoric sensation experienced during running, usually unexpected, in which the runner feels a heightened sense of well-being, enhanced appreciation of nature, and transcendence of barriers of time and space" (p. 274). However, George Sheehan (1978), the original guru of runners,

frequently spoke of suffering experienced during marathons.

Chapter fifteen in his book is titled "Suffering," wherein he speaks about his experiences in the Boston Marathon, and states he was, "deeper and deeper into a cauldron of pain" (p. 215). Talking about distance running, he quotes Buddha, "As long as you are in time there's suffering." (p. 250)

Andrew Cooper (1998) describes qualities of the zone as "profound joy, acute intuition (which at times feels like precognition), a feeling of effortlessness in the midst of intense exertion, a sense of the action taking place in slow motion, feelings of awe and perfection, increased mastery, and self-transcendence" (p. 33). Cooper says, "In these ecstatic moments, something altogether transcendent pierces the cloud of life's confusion to illuminate an underlying perfection" (p. 37). In addition to the spiritual dimension, Cooper writes about "the athlete's craft" (p.44), describing the conditions necessary for the zone: craftsmanship, devotion to the game, and immersion in the activity. Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) list the components of flow which are fundamental to optimal experience and performance in sports. Among the components is "transcendent awareness" (p. 64), which, for a cyclist, is characterized by total absorption and focus on the ride. Self-consciousness, distractions and irrelevant thoughts are absent. While suggesting that the athlete forget himself or herself, the authors say, "Actually, awareness of the body and its movements is often heightened in the flow" (p. 67).

For elite cyclists, this awareness of the body seems to be awareness of the pain that they are experiencing. Frankie Andreu's diary of the 1998 Tour De France (VeloPress, 1998) chronicles numerous moments of suffering. He speaks of Stage 10, and climbing the Col du Tourmalet, with a 6393 foot summit and an 8 grade, "After freezing in the wet, the next climb was the Tourmalet, 18km straight up into the clouds and rain. I was so cold coming down the hill, I couldn't stop my legs or body from shaking. It was hard for me to control my bike to make the corners...When I reached the bottom, I could barely pedal, my legs feeling like icicles. I was afraid to push on the pedals because it felt like I would break some tendons or something" (p. 102). Seventeen riders quit that day: Andreu comments on another rider, Johann Bruyneel, "Bruyneel quit because he had been riding with a broken rib since a crash he had in Ireland. I don't know how he went as long as he did" (p. 103). Andreu says, "When I'm climbing the mountain at my maximum effort, I won't even notice a temperature change, until one kilometer from the top. This is when I notice how soaking wet I am and try to figure out how to stay warm for the downhill. When the cold air slams against your wet body at 70kph, you freeze after about three minutes on the descent" (p. 103). The Tour de France is over one hundred years old and gives the best examples of the suffering that cyclists must endure in order to compete. Andreu sums it up by saying, "It was another extreme day...that only the Tour can provide" (p. 106).

Research on the Zone

The question is, then, what factors contribute to the heroic effort and endurance that sustains these cyclists? Of course, training, skill and determination are components, but there has to be another intangible component. A small number of researchers have investigated peak moments or flow states and have attempted to develop theories and models of peak performance. Grove and Lewis (1996, p380-391) investigated hypnotic

susceptibility and the attainment of flow states during exercise. Their study focused on exercise participants in non-competitive, circuit training class. They propose that hypnotic susceptibility is a variable of the flow state, and quote, "From a phenomenological perspective, flowlike states are similar to hypnotic states. Shared elements of these states include dissociation/detachment from one's surroundings, absorption, feelings of control, and perceptual distortions such as altered perceptions of time" (p. 381). K.S. Masters (1992) observed a positive correlation between cognitive dissociation and hypnotic susceptibility in marathon runners (p. 193-201).

Grove and Lewis conclude that an antecedent of the flowlike state, or zone, is the disposition-oriented factor of hypnotic susceptibility. They propose that athletes possessing traits consistent with the autotelic personality (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) are more inclined to experience hypnotic susceptibility, and thus attain flowlike states. Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, (1999), describe flow as an "autotelic experience, to denote a state of mind that is intrinsically rewarding. The word *autotelic* is derived from two Greek words that describe doing something for its own sake (*auto*=self; *telos*=goal.)" (p. 11). The authors list flow component number nine as autotelic experience, "one that is intrinsically rewarding, one that we choose to do for its own sake" (p. 30). Jackson and Marsh (1996) developed The Flow State Scale to assess and measure the construct of flow in sport. The researchers investigated the nine dimensions of flow in sport (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). While acknowledging that there are challenges and limitations in attempting to quantify experiential states, the authors did note that the dimension of "Autotelic Experience is crucial to the flow experience...this factor may be seen as having a more global nature than the other flow dimensions" (p. 30). Jackson and Marsh also state,

The fact that other dimensions such as concentration, control and challenge-skill balance had higher factor loadings than autotelic experience may indicate that the enjoyment factor is less central than other aspects of flow to athletes. Perhaps enjoyment is taken for granted to some extent in a free choice activity like sport. Another possibility may be that because of the goal-directed nature of competitive sport, enjoyment is seen as a somewhat antithetical to the serious nature of the endeavor (p. 30).

These researchers acknowledge that all of the dimensions of the flow or zone may not be universal to all sports.

Conclusion

Given the serious nature of professional competition such as the Tour de France, and the Giro d'Italia, combined with the intense degree of suffering by the cyclists, this paper proposes that professional cyclists enter a zone that may not include an experience equivalent to a runner's high. The victorious cyclist may be elated and ecstatic when crossing the finish line. However, the mystical experience, the sense of well being and spiritual experience elude the cyclist during the ride. There is simply too much intensity of effort, pain and suffering during a race to coexist with the kind of exhilaration and elated feelings that cyclist "Simon" was quoted as experiencing. To sustain and endure

pain and suffering over long periods of time, the cyclist, as well as the marathon runner, must enter a zone that differs from the zone experienced by athletes in other sports.

For elite cyclists, critical dimensions for the zone would seem to be the autotelic experience, the total absorption in the ride, and being in "kairos" time. The Greeks had two words for time: kairos and kronos. Bolen (1996) defines kairos time as "when we participate in time and lose our sense of time passing, we are in *kairos*; here we are totally absorbed and in the present moment, which may actually stretch out over hours" (p. 86).

The other important dimension of the cycling zone is the trait of hypnotic susceptibility, which would allow the cyclist to dissociate from the pain and extreme conditions that must be endured during a race, such as the Tour. This dissociation, combined with the total focus and absorption of transcendent awareness (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi 1999), would explain the ability to overcome suffering and perform, even to the death. In 1967, during the 13 stage of the Tour de France, "...on a July afternoon of suffocating heat... Britain's best-ever cyclist, Tom Simpson, rode himself to a standstill, keeled over and died" (Conquests and Crises, 1999, p. 125).

Greg LeMond commented on the ability to endure suffering, "The key is being able to endure psychologically. When you're not riding well, you think, why suffer? Why push yourself for four or five hours? The mountains are the pinnacle of suffering" (Abt, p. 4). He also said, "If the average person tried professional cycling, he'd say, 'My God, I can't believe how tough this is.' I believe that cycling is the toughest sport of all..." (Abt, p. 11). Abt writes about the cyclist's ability to bear pain and keep pedaling. "Suffering is what professional cycling is all about, and champions suffer the longest. The ability to suffer can be heightened through training, which is why racers go out on the road for up to seven hours most days during winter and early spring" (p. 131). Lance Armstrong, cancer survivor and winner of the 1999 Tour de France, is cycling's most recent example of the ability to endure against all odds, suffer and be victorious. His focused determination and perseverance, and his ability to endure and overcome pain are an inspiration to everyone, and a perfect illustration of cycling in the zone.

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