



Athletic Insight

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The Zone and Golf

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ABSTRACT

The zone is a distinct and unusual psychological state. The six characteristics that allow one entrance into this state include: confidence, focus, pleasure, non-verbal thinking, calmness, and the ability to tolerate excitement. These six processes are considered necessary and sufficient to enter this psychological state. Suggestions are provided to aid the athlete in achieving this condition.

Introduction

We have all heard about THE ZONE, that mythical place where one can do no wrong. When in the zone you know you are there and you know you can't miss a shot. A visit to the zone is unforgettable. Well exactly what is the zone? Is it a real psychological state? If so how can we teach athletes to find it at will?

The American Heritage Dictionary defines the zone as "an area, region or division distinguished from adjacent parts by some distinctive feature or character." This provides us with some hints as to what the zone is. Obviously it is a psychological place not a physical one. It is distinguished from ordinary golf in many ways. It feels phenomenologically different and your performance is far superior to your average round.

It is as if you are in a totally different psychological skin entirely. What are the features that set one apart from ones usual functioning while in the zone? It is these unseen characteristics that we will explore in this paper. Only when we understand all aspects of entrance to 'the zone' will we be able to teach athletes how to enter it.

Confidence

This commonly used psychological concept is defined as "a feeling of assurance or certainty, especially concerning oneself." Playing with confidence means both being relaxed and having positive expectancy about your next shot. Confidence is ephemeral and is often triggered by a series of good shots. When one starts to hit a series of good shots confidence is a possible temporary result and this may be maintained if one can

manage the excitement and remain calm. This is the first and perhaps the most crucial step to entering the zone. The ability to remain calm while playing well is probably connected to ego strength and self-esteem, the feeling that you really are a good player.

When your expectancy to play well is matched by your actual performance one remains relaxed and in cognitive consonance. If one starts to play well, unless one carries self-esteem this will induce anxiety which leads to self-doubt and poor performance. Positive expectancy and confidence are key features to the zone.

As mentioned above a critical aspect of confidence is the expectancy that you will hit your next shot well. After you hit some good shots you begin to expect to repeat this.

Operationally this translates into the following. When you are over the shot you will more likely visualize your next shot more vividly and clearly. Positive visualization is a basic imagery technique proven to enhance performance and we see it is a key feature of playing in the zone (Suinn, 1983).

Rx: To enhance confidence and enter the zone more frequently get into the habit of visualizing your shots during the pre-shot routine. The more vividly you imagine your entire shot and maintain this visualization during the two seconds of the swing the more often the ball reaches the target.

Focus

Another reason playing in the zone provides such spectacular pleasure and great results relates to the intensity of focus involved. Someone could hit the player on the head during the swing and he would still execute well when he is in the zone. This level of focus is far different from ordinary focus in golf. It is customary to hear golfers complain about slight banter around them and ask for silence. That is a sign of poor focus and not being in the zone. I can recall being so focused in one college tournament that after I made a 10 foot putt my caddy apologized to me for dropping the bag as I putted. My response was to say I did not hear a thing. Focus in the zone means that your attention is fully preoccupied with the task at hand and the focus is both non-verbal and positive. Goldberg (1997) suggests that being in the zone is like being in harmony with the universe where the mind and body become one. This is a basic tenet of zen philosophy which promotes the connection between mind and nature and mind and body.

Focus is related to these concepts of harmonizing. When attention is focused on the target exclusively the body joins this focus by hitting it there. The discipline of focusing mind on target is dependent upon imagery processing. Verbal processing takes you out of the zone and visual processing takes you into the zone. When the mind is trained to visually perceive the target and maintain this perception throughout the two seconds of the swing you get into the zone. This type of processing and focus tends to remove the player from normal social interaction with playing partners and also may be why the term 'zone' is used to describe this state. One is literally zoned out of normal states of interaction.

Pleasure

Csikszentmihalyi (1988) studied artists 'in flow' and found them reporting joy and pleasure during this process. This type of pleasure during play or work in the zone is

intrinsically motivating and perhaps a reason people devote so much time to golf. They seek out the pleasure and pride felt while playing in the zone. Csikszentmihalyi was clearly uncomfortable using Freud's theory of sublimation to explain the obvious pleasures felt in the zone. He like so many other non-psychoanalysts misinterpreted sublimation. All sports derive their pleasure from a combination of sensual and aggressive instincts. When the eyes, and the muscles are used in unison without interruption from the verbal processors great pleasure is felt. To the extent that golfers learn to rely on their visual and kinesthetic apparatus and not their verbal skills they find pleasure, enhanced performance and calmness. The more the player learns to simply walk and look rather than to verbally think he is taking a step closer to being in the zone. I often teach my athletes to ask a single question to themselves 18 times during the round. As they walk onto each tee they are instructed to ask themselves "Am I having fun?" If yes, just keep doing what they are doing. If they answer no they are not having fun then it is time to make an adjustment in attitude. I ask them to start looking at nature, start breathing more deeply and start seeking pleasure, joy, and fun as they proceed through the round. Non-verbal sensual practice of looking listening and feeling nature around you will promote energy and calm. This form of zen meditation enhances performance and helps one to find the zone more quickly because it puts you more in touch with your body rather than your mind. Golfers tend to be more intellectual and obsessive and any exercise that takes them out of their intellect and into their bodies is useful for performance.

Relaxation

As previously discussed, playing with confidence can produce great golf scores and this can lead to anxiety. How does the golfer maintain a sense of relaxation during the round no matter how well he is playing? A significant part of remaining in the zone is the ability to stay calm no matter how deep you go. Exactly how is this done? One method is with visual imagery. Imagine yourself pulling a little basket behind you. It is attached to you by a ten foot rope. Every time you have an anxiety producing thought visually place it in the basket behind you so it is permanently removed from your body. Keep placing those negative and fright-producing thoughts such as "Oh No! I have never been this low before!" in the basket outside of you and when you develop this habit you will start to maintain your ability to stay calm.

Excitation

Ironically just as calm is a necessary ingredient to getting into the zone, excitation is also. Taylor (1996) has discussed the 'zone of optimal functioning' by suggesting that one needs a certain level of intensity to perform well. Too little or conversely too much intensity will hurt performance. How does one produce excitement and manage it well? We all want some excitement in our lives. This is a primary reason that athletes play sports. Excitement is felt when you are about to defeat an opponent or best your former personal record. Excitement in this context relates to aggression. When in the zone you are playing well, you are winning and nonetheless you remain calm. Dr. Nilssen, Sweden's premier sport psychologist and trainer of Anika Sorenstrom on the LPGA trains

her athletes as follows. She teaches her charges to remain silent for the entire round. I believe this technique is so effective because it removes the player from the psychological interactions usually experienced during the round. When this is done it is far easier to feel less guilt or conflict about acting aggressively about winning. It is a truism that narcissism helps athletes perform better since the narcissist sees people as objects and thus rarely feels guilt about aggression or about hurting someone. Dr. Nilsson's techniques may in some way be related to this dynamic. It may be inducing a temporary healthy form of narcissism which allows the golfer to master and to manage his or her excitement and aggression without guilt or conflict. With this they remain in the zone for longer periods. This very useful technique is surprisingly difficult to put into effect and you will find that most amateur golfers are more concerned about their social image than their score thus will not take the risk to be seen as cool or aloof by remaining silent.

Summary

The zone is that unique place that indicates one is in the right physical, emotional and mental space. The five keys to open up the zone are confidence, focus, pleasure, calmness, and excitement. One needs to learn to think kinesthetically and visually. One needs to master the art of calmness despite feeling great pressure and excitement. These are some of the keys to arriving at that very pleasurable and unforgettable place known as the zone.

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