

Getting in the Zone

Throughout these Olympics we hear numerous references to sports psychology and how important it is for athletes to be able to focus on the task at hand and block out any distractions that may hinder their performance. An athlete's ability to maintain the level of concentration necessary to achieve their best performance is called entering the "Zone". The Zone has been described by athletes as being "hot", "in a groove", "on a roll" or "in the flow". These are special states where everything is going well and the athlete is hitting on all cylinders. This state is where athletes feel they are totally involved and may describe the sensation as being on automatic pilot. The zone experience occurs when an athlete's skills are equal to his or her challenge. Since being in the zone is necessary to produce an optimal performance, there has been substantial research on what it takes for an athlete to get into the zone.

According to sports psychology researcher, Sue Jackson, there are a number of factors that are most important for getting into the zone:

- 1) Motivation to perform. Having challenging but realistic goals are essential to achieving peak drive.
- 2) Optimal arousal levels. Being relaxed, controlling anxiety, and enjoying the activity contribute to the correct level of stimulation.
- 3) Appropriate focus. Narrowing in on key points in the activity, staying in the present moment, being centred before the performance help with concentration.
- 4) Plans and preparation. Following pre-competitive routines to feel totally ready. Having a competitive plan to anticipate potential unusual events is also an important component of feeling equipped.
- 5) Maximum physical preparation and readiness. Keeping healthy eating and sleeping habits. Avoiding over-training to capitalize on strength and agility.
- 6) Optimal environmental and situational conditions. This includes having a good atmosphere, positive feedback from coaches, favourable playing conditions, and no outside pressures.
- 7) Confidence and mental attitude. Believing you can win, positive thinking, blocking negatives, and enjoying what you're doing help build confidence.
- 8) Team play and interaction. This includes good passing, playing as a unit, and open communication.

If you are an athlete who is interested in reading more about the zone and improving your performance through mental training check out the following books: *Mental Edge* by Kenneth Baum, *Flow* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and *In Pursuit of Excellence* by Terry Orlick.

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