

As you come to the end of the season, all athletes look to perform their best in championship games and tournaments. "**Flow**" is the sport experience where you become so absorbed in what you are doing to the exclusion of all other thoughts and emotions. Your mind and body work together effortlessly and you feel like something special has just occurred. You perform at your peak quite naturally. It has also been called "being in the zone" and described as "peaceful", "when everything clicks", and being "totally in control". It is an ideal performance state - and one that can help you win these important contests. Below are seven ways to get yourself into the flow experience:

1) Find Your Challenge-Skills Balance

Identify what is challenging about your sport. What do you hope to accomplish by extending yourself, pushing your limits and getting out of your comfort zone? The personal challenge of the contest (or your goal within the game) can serve as your motivation. Balance these goals with an objective assessment of your skills and be realistically confident (not overconfident, not doubting). Flow is the rewarding state when you are pushing yourself to do something that can only be achieved with great effort.

2) Go Beyond "Normal" Awareness

"Normal" awareness is our typical focus that jumps from thing to thing to meet the multiple demands in our lives. We often review the past and are eager to reach the future. Flow provides moments of uncluttered thinking and freedom from self-doubts and worry. To be fully absorbed in what you are doing: forget yourself (focus on the task instead), let your opponents worry about themselves, accept the environment as a given (after all - the field is muddy for *everyone*), and focus on the process (what you need to do) and not the outcome (the score or winning).

3) Know Where You Are Going

Know clearly what you want to accomplish by the end of the season, the next game and/or today's practice. Describe it in specific behaviors you can measure. "Doing your best" doesn't help if you don't know what it looks like. Condition yourself so you are prepared for the challenging road ahead. Do not let poor sleep, nutrition, or a lack in training prevent you from reaching your goal. Give yourself time to prepare both your body and mind before competition to prime it for performance and solidify your commitment to succeeding no matter the adversity. Being well prepared and determined will give the confidence and edge you need to achieve flow.

4) Take Advantage of Feedback

Most of us don't like to be corrected - especially perfectionists who can react to criticism with anger and frustration. But the "perfect perfectionist" welcomes this type of information so that improvements can be made in the pursuit of excellence. Coaches are an excellent source of information. Use their negative feedback to set goals for improvement. Focus on the positive feedback to strengthen your confidence. Be open to communication from teammates as you work together to improve. They give you feedback because they want you to be the best you can be and achieve team goals. Focus on your own performance and be aware of the cues provided by your body's movements and reactions. Make adjustments when necessary. When you are in flow, feedback is clear and precise and keeps your mind focused.

5) Focus on the Present

A flow focus has you fully absorbed in the "right here - right now". You perform your best when your thoughts are on what you are doing at the present moment. As I like to tell my athletes, "Be where you're at!". Taking a deep, centering breath can help you refocus on the here and now. Being prepared also helps. Know what you need to focus on during each moment of performance (this may change as the play develops, or during the game like shifting from offense to defense). Fully understand your game plan so that it is automatic. Recognize that you never "lose" focus - you just *choose* to focus on the wrong thing at the wrong time. Be aware of when that happens, and choose differently the next time. You have the opportunity to control your focus, always.

6) Control the Controllables

Legendary coach John Wooden said, "Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do." So much of sport is out of our control: the weather, the competition, the crowd, the refs, etc. This is part of what makes sport such an enjoyable challenge. To perform your best, focus your attention only on the 3 things you can control: your own thoughts (focus), your feelings (emotional control), and your behaviors (the process of playing). This will increase your sense of personal control and confidence.

7) Focus On Fun

We *play* sports, we don't *work* them. The flow state is more likely to occur when we are aware of the pure enjoyment in our performance, how much fun we are having, and "why" we are playing. The opportunity to display skills and meet challenges increases enjoyment. Avoid thinking that "winning is all that matters." Such an approach will hurt your performance, no matter how important winning is, because it pulls you out of the flow experience. Instead, focus on the task and the personal challenge of each moment in sport. The opportunity to experience flow will increase and so will your chances of winning.

Reference: Jackson, S.A. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1999). *Flow In Sports. Human Kinetics: Champaign, IL.*

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