



PLC Focus of the Week: Helping Athletes and Team Achieve a Personal Best Performance

This week's coach note is a review of the book *Flow in Sports* by Susan A. Jackson and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi which goes in depth into understanding a state of mind that many athletes work and train to achieve in a time of competition. The authors describe "FLOW" or the state of "being in the ZONE" through nine different characteristics: challenge-skills balance, action-awareness merging, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, concentration on the task at hand, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, transformation of time, an autotelic (intrinsically rewarding) experience. These are the characteristics athletes have described experiencing while they are in a state of flow ("in the ZONE") during competition. To be in a state of flow, an athlete does not have to experience all of these characteristics at once, because flow is different for every athlete, but often multiple forms of these characteristics are experienced by the athlete when in his or her own flow.

It is a goal of nearly all athletes to get themselves in a state of flow, groove, rhythm, or whatever they may refer to it as. But as the book explains, it takes a particular set of circumstances to allow an athlete the opportunity to reach this level. The authors point out that a combination of challenges and skills need to be correct for the opportunity to exist. The area where the skills and challenges of the competition and athlete intersect must be opportune for flow to be achieved. If the challenge is too high or the skills of the athlete



"If you can dream it,
you can do it."

~Walt Disney

"Success is not final;
failure is not fatal: it is
the courage to continue
that counts."

~ Winston Churchill

are too low in comparison to the opponent then the athlete will be unable to reach flow, because he or she will simply be out matched. Also, if the challenge is too low or the athlete is far superior, then flow will not be reached because the competition will not be enough to keep the focus of the player or athlete. However, when everything lines up and flow is achieved then that athlete may be able to reach a personal best performance.

What coaches do to put their athletes in the best position to reach a FLOW state is critical:

- Build your athletes' and your teams' confidence – This is #1 in creating personal best performances.
- Believe in your athlete's ability to succeed.
- Set your athletes up to take risks and seek challenge.
- Re-focus goals for each game to eliminate anxiety or apathy.
- Change the team focus from creating certain outcomes (just focusing on winning the game) to creating opportunities for optimal experiences (both individual and team).
- Never "punish" for poor performance, but use mistakes as an opportunity to teach your athletes.

It is important to remember that your athletes will never reach a flow state of performance if they are being screamed at and/or dictated to from the sidelines. Help them to achieve greatness by letting them play. Positive preparation leads to confidence which leads to flow (optimal performance) in play.