



Champion Coach Note: Flow

Hitting your stride; getting in the zone; finding the sweet spot; having the hot hand. Anyone who has played sports knows what it is like to get there. It's the spot where everything is clicking, performance is effortless, and success is coming in bunches. This higher state of being is something almost divine in sports, where athletes almost leave the normal realm of everyday life and enter a world where they can soar to new heights.

Sports psychologists Susan A. Jackson and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refer to this ecstatic feeling as "flow." They identify flow 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
- Intrinsically rewarding experience

These are the characteristics athletes have described experiencing while feeling as though they are in a state of flow 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.



"The rewards are going to come, but my happiness is just loving the sport and having fun performing."

~Jackie Joyner Kersee

Can a coach encourage a state of flow? Or is just something that happens? The answer is yes! As a coach it is important to:

- Build your athletes 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 and apathy.
- Change team focus from creating certain outcomes (just focusing on winning the game) to creating opportunities for optimal experiences.
- Never punish for poor performance, but use mistakes as an opportunity to teach your athletes.

There is one activity that can encourage flow more than any other: Having fun. More than any meditation, focus, intensity, instruction, or any other preparation, an athlete is most likely to encounter flow when he or she is having a joyful experience. So make sure that the sports experience never gets away from what it should be: fun!