

A Study on the Flow State of a Cricketer

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Abstract Performance of a cricketer is crucial to his own career and also for his team's success. Preparation is crucial in both physical and mental arena. Trying to break out of comfort zone decides professional success. The more a cricketer is able to maintain himself in the flow state the more successful he will be. The most important factor of this flow state is that it refers directly to the cricketers understanding / subjective perception of his own ability to perform or execute a skill / to do the task at hand and his perception of the challenge, instead of the actual challenge or ability itself. He should be able to maintain a balance between his perception about the challenge and the actual challenge. If the two of these are not balanced, it will most likely hinder or completely stop the onset of flow. If the perception of the cricketer about the challenge is greater than the perceived skill, it makes him feel anxious or worried that he not be able to complete the task without pain or embarrassment, or possibly not complete the task at all. This paper attempts to discuss the flow state and its relationship with the Performance and also some of the methods that can be used to get into the Flow state.

Keywords Ideal Performance State, Flow, Anxiety, Mental Imagery, Mental Preparation

1. Introduction

The highest level players are able to get there in the most intense of scenarios and win the crucial moments of the game and thereby win the crucial moments and the game. To handle such kind of pressure a cricketer should be in the "Zone" or in the ideal performance state for better performance. We would have often heard people saying that he is in full flow. Flow is one of the states of being, entirely in the present, more creative, productive, and happy. Flow is where you feel that you are totally *involved on the job on hand without your mind wandering here and there*. The brain at this state filters out everything that is not necessary and focuses only on what is important at the time. The interaction between your conscious mind and sub conscious mind will enable us to be in the / Flow /being in the zone / maintain the ideal performance state.

2. Flow State

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) quipped that the Flow state was brought about by at least two key things: goals and feedback. In his work [5] he also discusses about the flow experience and its significance for human psychology.

The significance of the concept of flow, its role in positivity, and its implications are explained below. How does one get to this a Flow state of mind? There can be several ways, different triggers and various activities that they enjoy doing.

In [4] Loehr's said that "a measurably different mental or psychological state exists when an athlete is performing well, as opposed to when he/she is performing poorly." The extremely similar feelings of top athletes during peak performance led the way to the development of the critical understanding that mental toughness is the ability to create and maintain the right kind of internal feeling (IPS) regardless of the circumstances.

Elite cricketers who have attained an optimal performance often describe their subjective state as having been "in the zone". While difficult to assess or measure, the 'zone' or ideal performance state, it is often reported as being comprised of a balance of excitement and awareness, involving deep concentration and full immersion in the activity where athletes exhibit high levels of skill mastery, self-confidence and an automaticity of performance. Further it is also seen that in the IPS / FLOW STATE, there is no fear, no thinking or analysis, focus of attention is completely on the activity, a sense of time, space, and control and effortlessness prevail.

Most elite performers feel that achieving flow is controllable and have learned to successfully achieve this state in order to perform to their potential as they approach peak events such as the World Cup throughout the competitive season and even to ensure they have achieved a sufficient level of readiness for each and every training session.

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How to achieve this Ideal performance state of to be in the Flow / Zone? Ideally there are 4 states which can be identified in the process of being in the flow state.

First and foremost is that we should come out of the comfort zone. This is the most difficult stage. Because people are reluctant to change their belief systems because of the conviction they have however negative it may be. This mental programme which is stored in the subconscious mind, which is called as the comfort Zone should be challenged and accepted.

The next logical step is, when a challenge is accepted there are two ways in which one deals with it. Researchers call it as Fight or Flight mode. The option to choose to whether fight or Flight mode is the biggest challenge lying before the cricketers. Those who choose the flight mode are the ones who take on the challenge and their brain accepts the challenge and takes it on from the Conscious mind – the Master to the subconscious mind and starts processing the new thoughts and react accordingly.

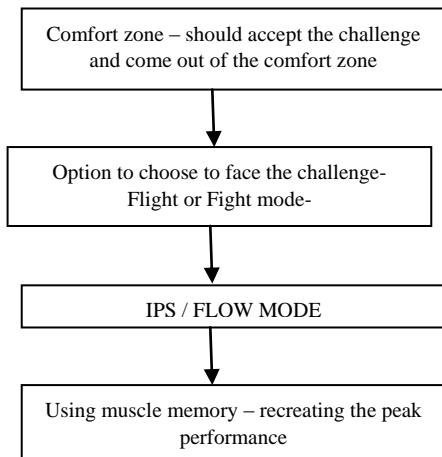


Figure 1. States of Flow

Once this happens, the next stage - it is said that the cricketer is at peace with himself and the reaction becomes automatic and he is said to be in flow, and does the activity with so much ease and productivity.

The fourth stage is recreating the flow state by using the muscle memory, i.e. by remembering the best / peak performance and the new ideas that sprang on account of such performance.

3. Relationship between Performance and Flow State

The Inverted-U Theory was created by psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson in 1908. Figure 2 depicts a graph relating the performance and the various levels of arousal which is associated with the flow state. When the arousal levels are low, the performance tends to be poor; in other words the person is not in Flow state. When the arousal level is appropriate person is in the flow state and the performance is at peak which is shown in the middle of the

graph. When the pressure mounts and the person is not able to cope up with the increased anxiety levels, the flow tends to dip leading to performance deterioration. This is shown by the sloping right hand side of the graph.

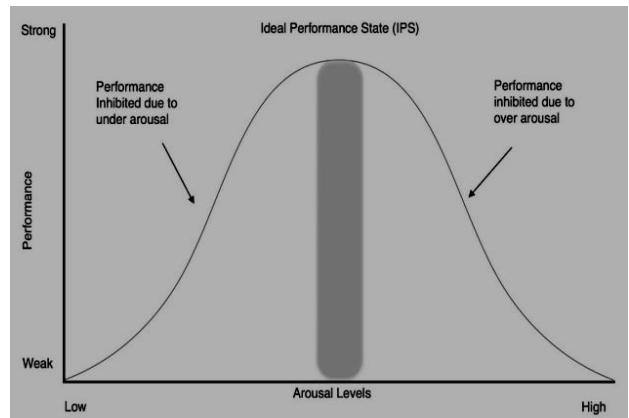


Figure 2. Inverted u Theory

4. Methods to Get into the Flow State

The next significant question would be what is to be done to create this state of mind where magic happens. It is seen from researches already done around the notion of how best to achieve one's optimal performance state, the approach that is best, differs from one cricketer to the other. Several factors have been found to promote having a flow experience including the ones given below which will have a great impact on the process of getting into the Flow state:

- Management of anxiety
- Personal reflection
- Match simulation
- Self Imagery
- Routines

4.1. Management of Anxiety

The figure 3 depicts the symptoms of an anxious person. As cricketers are continually exposed to stressful stimuli that may evoke several emotional responses, Over a period of time, we must learn strategies to regulate our emotions so that we are managing our emotion and control such emotions to focus our attention on task-relevant cues within the competition environment. We should understand that when our mental and physical preparation has been ineffective leading to a less than optimal performance, it is often the result of having performed inadequate or insufficient emotional preparation and management.

Emotional preparation is best done early on the day of the competition and athletes should be encouraged to become both aware of their emotions and to accept their feelings unreservedly in order to eventually bring their attention to the task at hand.

Research in this area have found that Biofeedback (e.g. heart rate, heart rate variability, respiration rate, skin temperature) and neuro feedback (measuring brain activity

frequencies through electroencephalography) during training are proving beneficial for athletes wishing to develop effective responses to stress towards ensuring they can achieve an optimal performance state on demand.

It is found that while these tools have considerable practical significance in the training of the biological and neurological responses associated with stress, further empirical research is required to provide support for the efficacy of these interventions as part of a psychological training programme for athletes.

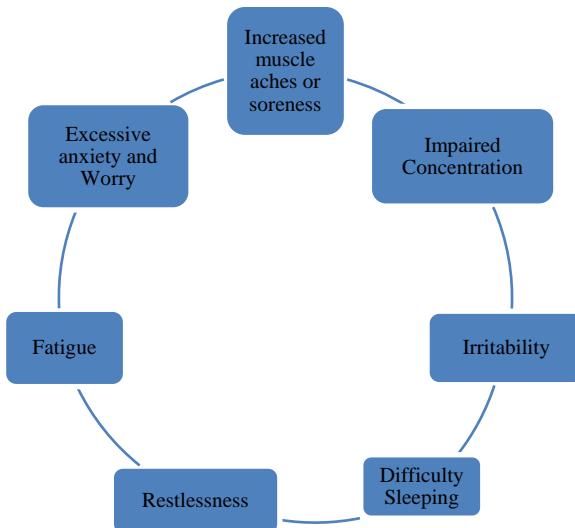


Figure 3. Symptoms of Anxiousness

4.2. Personal Reflection/ Self Analysis

Laura et al in his work [2] describes reflection as a key factor in expert learning and refers to the extent to which individuals are able to appraise what they have learned and to integrate these experiences into future actions, thereby maximizing performance improvements. In his work he finds relation between self-reported reflection at baseline and attainment (i.e., international vs. national level) 2.5 years later in 52 elite youth athletes.

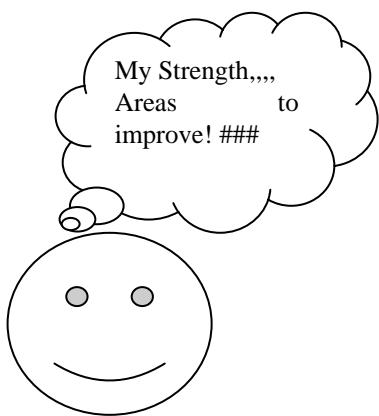


Figure 4. Self Analysis

Self-reflection is a process by which you grow your understanding of who you are, what your values are, and why you think and act the way you do. It is a form of

personal analysis that allows you to bring your life into alignment with what you wish it to be. We need to learn and understand from our training and competitive experiences what has worked for us in order to perform at their best. Both training and competitive performances are debriefed in order to capture the learning regarding their mental and emotional states and related activity prior to and during their training and competitive performances. We must have heard many coaches advising to write dairy. This is a very important habit which clearly records our every day workouts and can be of great use in learning about ourselves in our endeavor in becoming expert performers.

4.3. Match Simulation – Effective Practice Session

Being able to perform well under pressure relates well to the notion of flow in that situations of high challenge and it requires cricketers to acquire and perfect the skills needed to deal effectively with their performance demands. In [7] the authors discuss the implementation a simulation environment where the characteristics of individual batsmen and bowlers are used to generate ball by ball outcomes. In [8] the authors suggest that it may be possible to determine player worth and to investigate optimal team selection and optimal batting orders.



Figure 5. Match Simulation

The practice session / environment in which a cricketer trains often do not adequately create the nature of their competitive situation. This is one of the factors which affect the performance and this one the reason for experiencing difficulty when performing becoming distracted by, opponent's level of intensity and/or speed and thereby experience higher levels of anxiety and/or arousal prior to or during their competition. Simulation can help the athlete to be ready for periods of adversity, ensuring that they will be less distracted when such situations arise.

4.4. Mental Imagery

In [3] Hardy et al defines Mental imagery as a popular cognitive simulation technique defined as “a symbolic sensory experience that may occur in any sensory mode”.

Creating a mental plan (simulating aspects of an upcoming performance) through mental imagery can prove very effective in fostering an optimal performance state prior to and during an athlete’s performance. Performing the skills

required perfectly within the mind can help to activate a network of neuronal coded programmes, which strengthen the nerve pathways within the brain that control the correct execution of the skill. Garnering images of past successful performances prior to an athlete's event/competition can keep confidence levels high and assist in lowering anxiety levels leading into the performance. Athletes should be encouraged to use all of their senses to create vivid mental images. This can include physical movement whenever possible to relate what is being imagined to the actions required to perform the skill.

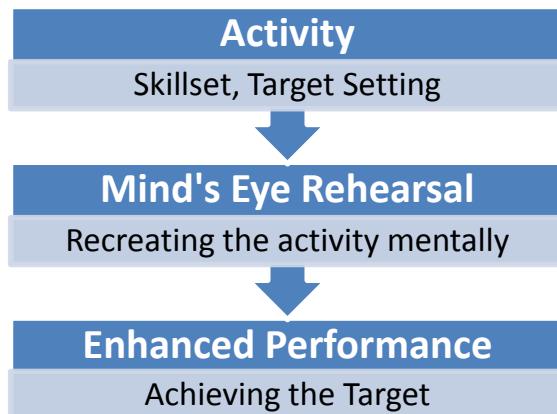


Figure 6. Mental Imagery

4.5. Routines

It is important to have a personalized routine that gives a feel good attitude and that which brings the attention back to the moment of performance. Organizing oneself with a set of routine is very important. Physical organization comes first and then come the mental organization. Learned routines serve to focus by eliminating distractions and transferring thoughts from task-irrelevant to task-relevant cues. It also gives a sense of control over the situation. Every cricketer has to create a system of routine that works best for him as individual like arriving at the ground well before the time scheduled for arrival with a good frame of mind, have a feel of the ground. Take a mental stock of things that needs to be done. There is no set formula for this. This is most individual.

Physical routines include warm up routines, pre-event strategy review and actions a cricketer will regularly do, physically and mentally, as part of their preparation for an upcoming Competition.

Mental routines include having a self talk, learning to switch on and off between every ball, focusing on what is relevant.

5. Conclusions

There is little doubt that achieving the optimal performance state is of considerable importance for cricketers. While some of the strategies have been discussed in this article, each cricketer is encouraged to explore the various methods and approaches that work best for them according to their personal traits, current abilities and the nature of their performance environment. This study is limited to only discussion on the flow state and some coping methods without any quantitative studies carried out.

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