

Investigating the Experience of Flow in European Tour Golfers

Christian Swann¹, Lee Crust¹, David Piggott², Richard Keegan³, & Brian Hemmings⁴

¹University of Lincoln, UK; ²Leeds Metropolitan University, UK;

³Canberra University, Australia; ⁴St. Mary's University, Twickenham, UK



UNIVERSITY OF
LINCOLN

Introduction:

Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) is conceptualised an optimal state of effortless excellence involving total immersion and concentration in an activity, which often leads to a sense of performing on “auto-pilot.” Commonly referred to as “**being in the zone**”, flow experiences are intensely enjoyable and memorable, while also linked with peak performance and peak experience (Jackson, 1996).

The experience of flow in **golf** may be different to other sports due to its slower paced, stop-start nature, warranting exploration. Also, qualitative data flow in sport has traditionally been **deductively** coded into Csikszentmihalyi's nine dimensions (see Table 1; Jackson, 1996). However, in a recent systematic review, Swann et al (2012) suggested that **inductive analysis** could be a more useful alternative to avoid potential over-interpretation or ‘shoe-horning’ of data.

Aim: The aim of this study was to qualitatively explore how flow is experienced by elite, European Tour golfers, using an inductive approach to analysis. Essentially, this study aimed to compare the resulting description of flow to Csikszentmihalyi's dimensions **after** analysis rather than using it as a guide, in order to answer Jackson's call of more specifically describing flow in sport environments (1996).

Method:

The **participants** in this sample were 10 male professional golfers (Mean age: 37 years; Range = 23 - 58; SD = 13.08).

All of these golfers had competed full-time on the European Tour for at least one season (Range: 1 - 24 seasons; Mean = 10.7; SD = 7.5).

Five players had won tournaments on the European Tour (N= 10), six had been ranked inside the world's top 120 golfers, while two had represented Europe in the Ryder Cup (N = 4).

Semi-structured interviews explored previous experiences of flow using questions such as: “what are the clearest indicators of being in flow?” and “how does flow differ from normal golf?”

The data were analysed **inductively**, before processes of member checking, critical reflection, consensus validation and peer review were all employed in order to increase transparency and **trustworthiness**.



Discussion:

Of the 13 categories identified in this study, 11 were similar to Csikszentmihalyi's dimensions (for definitions, see Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Jackson, 1996). Two categories appeared to **extend** understanding of flow in elite golf. First, time transformation was found to be just one of a number of **altered cognitive and kinaesthetic perceptions** experienced during flow; others included sense of lightness, feeling enhanced physically, magnified visual perceptions, and visual narrowing. Therefore, in golf, time transformation could potentially be expanded to incorporate these other perceptions.

Second, these golfers reported **awareness and management of flow**, which does not appear to have been reported in any settings previously. Essentially, they were aware of being in flow as it was happening, attempted to manage/maximise it, contradicting Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) suggestion that individuals only realise they were in flow **after** the experience (due to being immersed in the activity at the time). These players also stated that flow was observable (e.g., through body language), which was also a new idea in this area of research and warrants further investigation, e.g., in other sports, or even settings beyond.



References:

1. Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
2. Jackson, S. (1996). Toward a conceptual understanding of the flow experience in elite athletes. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 67, 76-90.
3. Swann, C., Keegan, R., Piggott, D., & Crust, L. (2012). A systematic review of the experience, occurrence, and controllability of flow in elite sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 13, 807-819.

Results:

Thirteen categories describing the flow experience emerged, and these are compared to Csikszentmihalyi's nine dimensions in Table 1 below.

	Csikszentmihalyi's Dimensions	Present (Inductive) Findings
Similar	Challenge-skill balance	Perceived challenge
		Confidence
	Autotelic experience and motivation	Enjoyment and intrinsic rewards
		Increased intrinsic motivation
	Action-awareness merging	Automaticity
		Absorption
	Loss of self-consciousness	Absence of negative thoughts
	Clear goals	Performance objectives
	Unambiguous feedback	Positive feedback about performance
Concentration on the task at hand	Heightened concentration	
Extended	Sense of control	Perceptions of control
	Time transformation	Altered cognitive and kinaesthetic perceptions
		Awareness and management of flow

Table 1: Comparison of present findings to Csikszentmihalyi's nine dimensions

Additionally, these golfers noted **awareness** of being in flow as it occurred: “You're aware that you're having a better day than normal, but it's only an awareness. It's not a specific of: “how well am I doing?” It feels good, that's enough...I don't need to know any more”

Some players even attempted to **manage**, or **maximise/capitalise** on flow: “The main thing is that once it hits you, you just want to squeeze it until the last hole, you want to make it last... You want to maximise it...if you're on a roll you've really got to capitalise on it”

Finally, this sample also reported that they could **observe** flow in other players, e.g., through their body language: “You see it in someone's eyes when in that zone, they've got this...this look in their eyes when they're completely focused on what they're trying to do”; and:

“It's the quietness about the way they go about their business. It's kind of peaceful and efficient...there's no real idle chat...because they're totally into what they're doing”



Applied Recommendations:

Paradoxically, it may be important for golfers to develop ‘coping’ skills for when the performance is going particularly well, to learn how to **maximise flow** (e.g., by ‘staying out of their own way’), and to avoid choking in pressure situations.

Also, the possibility of **observing flow** could be relevant to coaches and practitioners (e.g., sport psychologists) in terms of knowing when to give advice, and when to avoid talking to, and possibly distracting, the athlete.

For more details please contact
Dr Christian Swann:
Email: cswann@lincoln.ac.uk
Twitter: @cswannpsych