

“I get that ball and I am running...like nothing else is there with me”: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of rugby players’ experience of flow during game-play

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Introduction

A flow experience is when an individual becomes completely immersed in the task at hand, as the task is challenging enough to push the individual to perform at their optimum skill level (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Initially studied in basketball players and those partaking in extreme sports, such as rock climbing, flow research has experienced a recent growth and interest. However, there remains a degree of uncertainty around what flow is, how it is experienced and how it should be studied.

Flow experiences are prevalent in sport due to the structured and competitive nature of these goal-directed activities. Due to the required skill, effort, presence of observers and interaction between players and coaches, sporting activities provide the optimal conditions for experiencing flow states (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Aube, Brunelle & Rousseau, 2014). Flow experiences have been associated with peak performance and wellbeing, which is why these experiences are seen as desirable for researchers to study in players, coaches and other sports professionals (Haworth, 1993; Bakker, 2005; Schiepe-Tiska & Engeser, 2012).

Assessing accurate flow experiences remains a challenge, as most research focuses on how flow occurs long after the experience. While this provides a rich insight into these lived experiences, there is a need for research to access flow experiences as they occur, or directly after. In addition to this, limited research focuses on rugby players’ individual and team experiences of flow, as well as that of their coaches.



The current research examined the flow experiences of rugby players and coaches both during and immediately after gameplay

Method

As flow experiences lend themselves well to qualitative research, the current study utilised semi-structured interviews with five rugby players and coaches from the Old Northamptonians rugby club. Participants were aged 18-35, three males and two females. Interviews took place both during and immediately after competitive gameplay, often within changing rooms or pitch side. Interviews were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009).

Results

The main themes and sub-themes can be found in Table 1 (below):

Main theme	Subthemes
1) Communication between players	a) Pitch position and awareness
<i>"I don't listen to everything that is going on, I kind of focus in on what I need to hear, so like, from a 10s point of view, if it's coming out to us, I'm looking listening for that call, or what's gonna happen next, so I know where I am supposed to be and what I am going to be doing."</i> (Kay—winger)	
<i>"I was thinking I am probably not got the gas to score myself, look for somebody else and then that's when I heard a call to my right and then I thought right brilliant, drew the man passed the right and then end of job."</i> (Lee - scrum half)	
2) Players' perception of control	a) Mindset b) Restrictions
<i>"You need to tackle hard and try and win the ball back, so in that situation you do lose control. [If] my team react quick and we know what we are doing, control doesn't feel like it has been lost. Whereas if we all fluster panic then I feel like I have lost my control for longer, my control isn't just mine it's the teams, I can't tackle a whole team on my own."</i> (Ellen - coach)	
<i>"When you're doubting yourself a little bit, struggling to come up with a solution as to how you can improve it, you think you're running out of options...feels like you're losing control."</i> (Gary - forwards)	
<i>"I had had some bad news from work so my head was not in the right place...when we went out I was holding back the tears...I was quite pleased I wasn't going on first, it would have massively impacted my game."</i> (Kay - winger)	
3) Time distortions	a) Experience b) Challenge Perception
<i>"From then on in it was just it is a massive blur, when I play I am just in that moment in that time. I don't really notice anything else around me, like obviously my team because I need to know where they are, but in terms of the surrounding of where we are and people on the side line it is very much, just I don't see that at all, it is just focused on what I am doing where my team are and where I need to be going next."</i> (Kay - winger)	
<i>"I can see it's different...when you're a player it's your bubble, you live in your bubble, you kinda experience other people's bubble, but when you're a coach it you're trying to see everybody's and feel and get the feeling of what's going on."</i> (Kev - coach)	

Key Points

- Accessing accurate flow experiences in sport remains challenging.
- Rugby players were interviewed during and after gameplay.
- Findings illustrate impact of flow on performance, team ethos and the exchange of information between players.
- Research provides an insight into the role of flow, including how these experiences are facilitated by team communication, player, coach and team perceptions of control and time.
- This research has implications for improving performance and player communication, as well as providing positive training and play environments.

Discussion

Sports provide optimal experiences to experience flow. The rich, qualitative accounts provided by players and coaches suggest flow experiences are linked to improved performance and team ethos. Communication appeared to be important for gameplay, as well as individual and team experiences of flow. This exchange of information between players and player roles included both verbal and physical positioning on the pitch.

Players’ perceptions of the game and how much they had control over the outcome appeared to influence their output of effort and the likelihood of a flow experience. Player and coach mindset, expectations and other restrictions also influenced this sense of control. If the mindset was negative, this appeared to lead players and coaches to feel they cannot perform at their best. However, individuals who viewed restrictions as a challenge appeared to be more likely to overcome these restrictions and reach flow.

While time distortions were experienced by most players and coaches, this depended on experience and in-game challenges. For example, more experienced players described heightened time distortions, as optimal performance required less concentration and effort than for less experienced players. Time distortions appeared to change throughout the game and were often associated with flow experiences.

This research suggests that future work should focus on differing perspectives of flow by players, coaches and teams. It is also suggested that research distinguishes between flow and peak experiences in competitive sports. Findings have implications for our understanding of flow, as well as helping players to be more aware of when they are experiencing flow. This work also has implications for wellbeing, for creating positive sports environments, as well as in replicating flow in other areas of players’ lives.

Players had strong perceptions of control both during and after gameplay. This included their assessment of their own capabilities, as well as their in-the-moment assessment of the team’s current situation



Conclusions

- Competitive sports provide optimal conditions to experience flow.
- Accessing and assessing qualitative descriptions of flow during and immediately after rugby players’ gameplay provides a rich insight into the lived experience of flow within competitive sports.
- Research should consider both individual and team experiences, as well as the exchange of information between them during flow experiences.
- Flow research has implications for improving performance, team communication and to provide positive training and play environments.

This research was conducted as part of an undergraduate dissertation at The University of Northampton. For more information, please contact: cailin-jo@hotmail.com