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In the mind of an elite athlete: what do sportspeople think when they excel?

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In the mind of an elite athlete: what do sportspeople think when they excel?

Abstract

Most of us are fascinated by the achievements and successes of elite athletes, who train for years to have the opportunity to reach their goals on the world stage.

These sportspeople show us what's possible for the human body - how fast we can move, how far and high we can jump, how strong or graceful we can be. But what goes on in the mind of an elite athlete performing at their peak?

Athletes' psychological states - the temporary, brief, subjective experiences that happen during exceptional performance - are often collectively described as "the zone". A recent example was British Open winner Henrik Stenson, who was described as "not just in the zone ... but on a crest of inspiration".

But the latest research shows there are two psychological states underlying excellent performances in elite sport - two different zones. Professional golfers describe these as "letting it happen" and "making it happen".

Keywords

sportspeople, think, excel, mind, athlete, when, elite, they, do

Disciplines

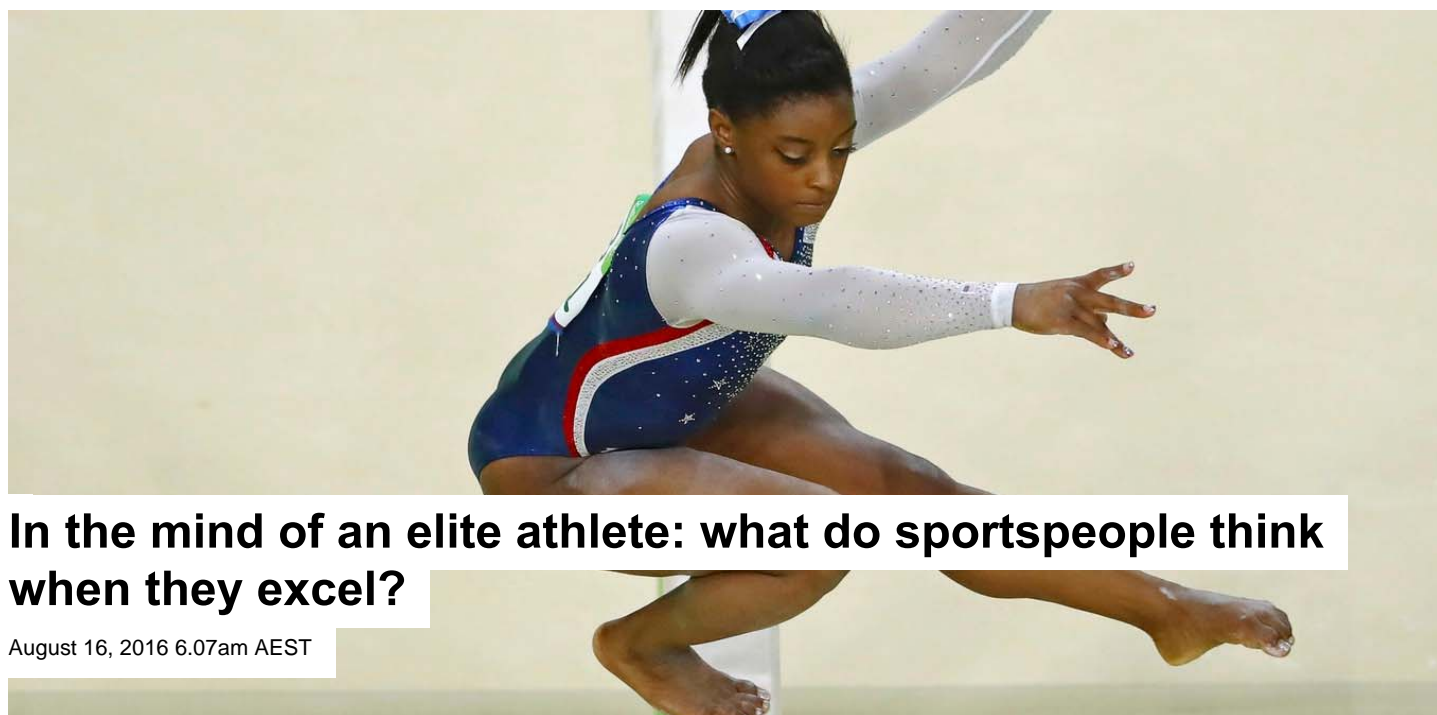
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THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



In the mind of an elite athlete: what do sportspeople think when they excel?

August 16, 2016 6.07am AEST

Letting it happen or making it happen? Reuters/Kai Pfaffenbach

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But the latest research shows there are two psychological states underlying excellent performances in elite sport – two different zones. Professional golfers describe these as “letting it happen” and “making it happen”.

Going with the flow

“Letting it happen” is based on the concept of flow, which has been applied across a wide range of domains – including sport – in over 40 years of research. Flow is a state

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of effortless excellence, in which everything “clicks into place”. We perform on autopilot, are totally confident in our abilities and fully absorbed in what we are doing without really thinking about it.

The nine dimensions of the flow experience are:

1. a balance between perceptions of challenge and skill
2. clear goals within the activity
3. unambiguous feedback about progress towards these goals
4. a merging of action and awareness so the athlete feels “at one” with their activity
5. loss of self-consciousness whereby the athlete becomes totally absorbed in their actions and loses self-critical, negative, or analytical thoughts common in “normal” or inferior performances
6. sense of control over performance
7. total concentration on the task at hand
8. transformation of time, which seems either to speed up or slow down
9. “autotelic”, which describes the enjoyment and intrinsic rewards gained from the experience.



Athletes in flow appear calm and relaxed, quietly concentrating on the task at hand. REUTERS/Marcelo del Pozo

Athletes in flow appear calm and relaxed, quietly concentrating on the task at hand. They look like they are enjoying themselves.

Making it happen

Research with professional golfers and elite athletes (under review), including Olympians, suggests flow is only part of the picture: they also describe times when they need to “make it happen”.

These performance states occur in clutch situations – when they know that important outcomes are on the line. An All Black rugby player described the last few minutes of the 2011 World Cup final as being this state because the World Cup – and 24 years of history – were at stake in a one-point game.

Clutch states share a core of similarities with flow, but are more effortful, deliberate, consciously controlled and intense. In this state, athletes are much more aware of the importance of the situation, what’s at stake, the potential consequences, and what’s required to achieve a successful outcome.

In clutch, athletes describe being conscious of the pressure, and feel the pressure, yet are still able to perform at their peak. For instance, when sprinters are neck and neck coming down the final stretch, they’re fully aware of what’s at stake and are visibly giving everything to try to achieve it – under intense pressure.

Both at once?

Interestingly, athletes also report that they can experience both of these states during the same performance. In some cases, they start well and build into flow, which continues until they realise they can achieve exceptional outcomes and then transition into clutch – consciously giving everything to have the best chance of achieving that outcome.

In other cases, athletes can experience clutch earlier in a performance (after a setback, such as a fall, for instance) in an attempt to regain their position, and then continue to excel and transition into flow.

The answer, then, to what happens in the mind of elite athletes when they excel is: sometimes it can be nothing; sometimes a lot!

Of course, not all exceptional performance outcomes will be experienced as one of these states; sometimes strange things happen in elite sport as Steven Bradbury might testify. But in many cases, the top athletes in the world will either be letting it happen, or making it happen when they inspire us with their superhuman feats.



Explainer Rio 2016