

## Peak Performance : How Do Athletes and Performers Find Their “Go Zone”

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ple utilize interventions that may actually make him/her more anxious. Sport psychology consultants can help athletes and performers use effective psychological interventions properly. The interventions that many sport psychology consultants teach athletes and performers to use to achieve consistent peak performance include: goal-setting, imagery, positive self-talk, understanding what is controllable and what is not, where and what to focus on, performance cues, and the use of pre-performance routines.

Many athletes and performers enter into sport psychology consultations

looking to find a quick fix to their problems. Often, they do not realize that in order to perform at their best each game or event, they need to work as hard on their psychological skills as they do on the physical, and tactical skills. Therefore, once an athlete or performer learns which psychological interventions fit best for her or him, the last step a sport psychology consultant will generally apply to help achieve consistent peak performance is accountability and maintenance. By meeting with a sport psychology consultant on several follow-up sessions, allows the athlete or performer the time to focus on and discuss how the psychological

interventions have been working. In addition, it gives the athlete or performer the opportunity to discuss possible setbacks, future goals, and gives the sport psychology consultant information about whether the athlete or performer is using the psychological interventions and strategies properly.

Whether you are an elite performer or novice amateur, finding your Go Zone consistently can be frustrating. However, with the use of proper psychological interventions, you might be feeling the flow more often than not.

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# Performance Excellence

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## Sport Psychology: It's Not Just for Athletes Anymore.

By Justin S. Anderson, Psy.D. &  
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Sport psychologists have long been interested in athletic performances. Through research and, ultimately, applied interventions, sport psychologists have helped athletes and coaches reach peak level performances, whether at the Olympics, in the professional leagues or the college arena, or at the recreational/youth sport level. As more and more athletes attribute (in part) their success to being mentally tough, performers in other domains, such as the arts, business, medicine and law, have taken notice and begun to incorporate mental training into their performance routines.

With the advent of technology and better (and earlier) training, people are becoming more technically skilled and competitive in their performance domains. Reaching a high level of success has become more challenging and now is less assured. Performers are realizing that, to be the best, they have to have more than knowledge of their domain or certain technical skills. They have to be sharp... able to perform at a consistently high level. They have to have a well-developed routine to prepare for performances. They have to be able to let go of distracters and focus on the task at hand. They have to be able to work effectively with their

“teammates” to the point that the individual is subsumed in the greatness of the group. In other words, they have to develop a strong “mental” side of their performances.

So, can performers who have never been athletes themselves or competed in a sporting environment improve by working with a sport psychologist?

The answer is often yes.

For example, many musicians suffer from performance anxiety, and therefore have a difficult time playing to the best of their abilities. This situation is similar to that of a baseball player who experiences anxiety before big games and can't hit as well as he normally would, or a businessperson who gets so worried before presentations that she does not effectively communicate all that she knows to her audience. In all three situations, the individual is trying to perform when over aroused (anxious). When such over arousal occurs, performers tend to play “tight”, be unfocused, experience a number of somatic symptoms (e.g., sweaty palms, shortness in breath, nausea), and have minds filled with negative self-talk (e.g., “I can't do this”, “I am going to mess this up”, etc.). In the end, their performances

suffer. For the musician, it may be hitting the wrong notes or being off with her fellow musicians. For the baseball player, it may be swinging at poor pitches or being tentative at bat. And for the businessperson, it may be communicating in a monotone voice or forgetting key points during the talk. Fortunately, most of the skills and strategies that are central to the work that sport psychologists do with athletes, coaches and sport teams apply equally well to these other performance domains. Thus, how a sport psychologist might work with the baseball player would be similar to how he/she would help the musician or businessperson.

So how can Sport Psychologists help?

Sport psychologists help performers in three primary ways - by teaching them new mental skills and strategies, by helping them cope more effectively with personal issues in their lives, such as relationship concerns or depression, and by helping them learn to work more effectively with “teammates” through improved communication, cohesion and leadership. Although a performer initially might seek out the services of a sport psychologist

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because of relationship concerns, during their work together, they might also focus on setting goals or developing a preperformance routine. In other words, sport psychologists may work simultaneously across these areas with any performer - the intervention is tailored to the needs of the performer.

To see how a sport psychologist might work within these three areas, let's consider the three performers (musician, baseball player, and businessperson) who were experiencing anxiety to a level that was interfering with their performances. The musician's anxiety was related to her need to perform "perfectly" at all times. When growing up, her parents had incredibly high expectations for her and pushed her to excel no matter what. Although this pressure initially sharpened her focus when playing, led her to master pieces that were incredibly challenging, and brought her success early in her career, as an adult it became a burden that weighed on her. Over the years, the pressure became the anxiety that she experienced...she would worry about her performances, have headaches in the days leading up to big performances, be irritable with her supporters, shun the more challenging work she embraced when she started her career, and find little enjoyment in her playing. The sport psychologist with whom she worked recognized these interpersonal and personal concerns and helped her to deal more effectively with them...developing challenging but realistic goals for her

playing, helping her rediscover the joy she had when playing, and determining how she was going to interact with her parents, who still played a central role in her career as a musician.

The baseball player's anxiety emerged as his play became more inconsistent. In some games, he was "on," at bat and in the field. But on more occasions, particularly during important games, he was erratic at the plate and would make errors in the field. He began to doubt his hitting, something about which he had been confident since he started playing. He also felt very out of control in how he prepared himself for each game...following different routines depending on how he was feeling that day and how he had played the last game. The sport psychologist with whom he worked recognized that his erratic performances were likely due to the inconsistent way in which he prepared himself for each game. In their work, the sport psychologist and baseball player developed a well-defined preperformance routine that he could follow prior to each game. This routine gave control back to the player and helped him access the thoughts, emotions and physical sensations he associated with peak performances. The routine encompassed the time a day or two before each game, the hours leading up to the game and the minutes before he took the field or batted for the first time. In addition, the sport psychologist taught him imagery skills that he used to regain his confidence while batting.

The businessperson's anxiety was related to her new position as a project manager and her lack of leadership and communication skills. She had quickly risen through the managerial ranks in her career field, landing in her current position 6 months ago. Prior to her current position, she worked primarily alone or with two or three other people. Her current position required her to supervise a staff of 15, all of whom were bright, skilled professionals. From the start, she had trouble communicating effectively with her staff, often alienating them with her comments and seeming lack of support. They began to view her as a poor leader and lose confidence in her ability to manage their project team. As this unfolded, she became distracted and less confident. The sport psychologist with whom she worked recognized that she would benefit from learning about her leadership style and how effective leaders communicated, but also knew that he would need to work with her and her "team" to reestablish the trust and confidence that had been lost during the last six months. Thus, in addition to teaching her communication and leadership skills, he facilitated a full-day team-building, cohesion workshop with her project group to help them come together as a unit and work more effectively together.

These are just a few examples to illustrate how sport psychologists can work with performers from all domains. Therefore, whether it's baseball, business or some other arena, sport psychology can help take your performance to the next level.

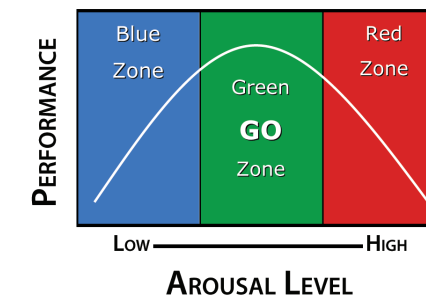
## Peak Performance: How do Athletes and Performers Find Their "Go Zone"

By Justin S. Anderson, Psy.D. & Trent A. Petrie, Ph.D.

You've experienced it. That time you were playing your sport and everything seemed to come easy. It was if time had slowed down, your body was fluid, and you were confidently reacting to what the game was giving you. It felt like you could do no wrong. You had complete control of your game. Some theorists call this feeling "Flow" others call it "being in 'the Zone'". Whatever you call it, you most likely realize that it doesn't come as often as you would like, and if you are like most people, you are not quite sure why it comes when it does. This article will give you an inside peak at how many sport psychology consultants work with athletes and performers to help them get in their Go Zone more consistently.

When working with athletes and performers, the first, and perhaps most important aspect of their learning how to consistently get into the "zone" begins by helping them recognize what happens to their bodies and mind when they are functioning at that optimal level. One component sport psychology consultants look at is an athlete's emotional arousal levels. The term "emotional arousal level" includes several different areas that the athlete or performer relies on during a performance, these include: physical sensations, cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. Most athletes or performers need some emotional arousal to feel ready and energized for the game/event, however; too much

emotional arousal often inhibits a performance. Therefore, when attempting to get athletes or performers in the Go Zone we tend to start by explaining the following graph.



As the graph depicts, highest level of performance, occurs in the middle ranges of the arousal levels or what we call the "Green Go Zone". Athletes or performers in this level of arousal report feeling calm, confident, in the moment, ready, focused, and energized. The blue zone represents a non-optimal, lower emotional arousal state where the athlete or performer reports feeling tired, bored, off, cold, unmotivated, flat, and not up for the game/event. Conversely, the red zone represents a non-optimal elevated emotional arousal level where the athlete or performer feels tense, high anxiety, fear, high anger, over emotional and/or out of control. Most athletes or performers do not spend much time thinking about their emotional arousal levels. Consequently, many are virtually unaware of the arousal level they primarily reside in or how to get into a more optimal zone. For instance, some football players think that being extremely angry, intense, or out of control is the way

to prepare for a game, where in reality, in order to make their reads, adjust to different formations, and be able to focus on a play, a lower level of emotional arousal might actually help them play better.

Perhaps the best way to learn how to get in the "Go" Zone is to learn from past events where the athlete or performer had performed in that "flow" state. In many instances, we ask athletes or performers to use imagery to bring them back to a time when they performed at an optimal level. From that image, we ask them to list the things they were thinking, doing and feeling before and during that event. From that description, we help them pull out several key points to focus on and then use multiple psychological interventions to help recreate their optimal emotional arousal level.

After an athlete or performer learns to accurately identify their individualized Go Zone, we then help them learn how to move from the non-optimal zone (blue or red) back into the green Go Zone. Many athletes, who are in a non-optimal zone, are unaware or unsure of which strategies to employ to help them get back into the Go Zone. For example, a musician may get too excited or anxious before a performance and not know how to calm down. Many of the things he/she attempts to do to calm down don't work, like how she talks to her self, or what she is focusing on before a performance. Many peo-