

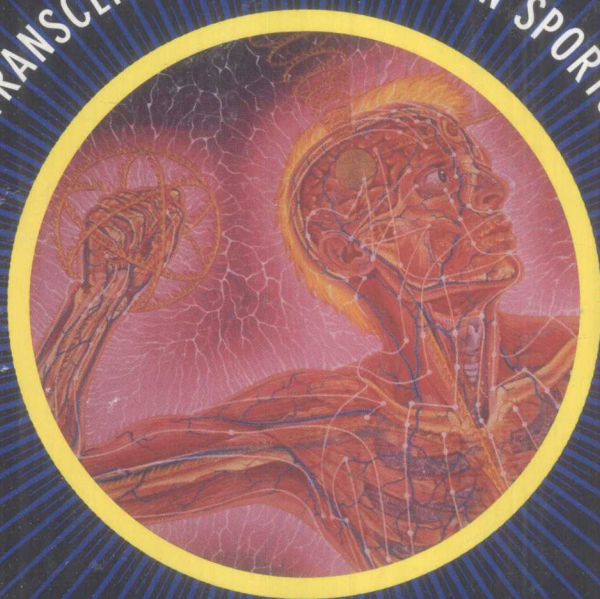
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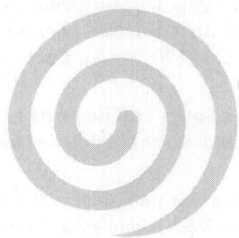
author of *GOLF IN THE KINGDOM*

and RHEA A. WHITE

IN THE ZONE

TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE IN SPORTS





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PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:

Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

The Psychic Side of Sports first published in the United States of America
by Addison-Wesley Publishing Company 1978

This revised edition with the title *In the Zone* published
in Penguin Books 1995

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Murphy, Michael, 1930 Sept. 3—

In the zone : transcendent experience in sports / Michael
Murphy and Rhea A. White.

p. cm.

Rev. ed. of: *The psychic side of sports*. c1978.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 14 01.9492 4

1. Sports—Psychological aspects. 2. Mind and body. I. White,
Rhea A. II. Murphy, Michael, 1930 Sept. 3— *Psychic side of sports*.
III. Title.

GV706.4.M87 1995

796'.01—dc20 94-44134

Printed in the United States of America

Set in Sabon

Designed by Katy Riegel

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever felt a special exaltation while playing a game or pursuing a physical adventure? Has sport ever lifted you beyond yourself in a way best described with religious language? If so, you are not alone. Since 1978, when an earlier version of this book was published, many studies of athletic "peak-experience" and "flow state" have been published in sport and psychology journals; talk about "the zone" has increased; and movies such as *Field of Dreams* have attracted worldwide audiences.

But in spite of this growing recognition, few people appreciate the great variety of experiences characterized by terms such as "play in the zone" or "peak performance." The stories in this book show that sport produces a range of metanormal* events that approaches the richness of experience evoked by religious practice. In the pages that follow, we identify more than twenty types of extraordinary athletic feats, exalted states of consciousness, and altered perceptions; and we believe that sport psychologists will eventually identify many more.

This study is informed by our lifelong interest in both sport and

* We use the word "metanormal," as well as the word "extraordinary," as technical terms to represent human functioning that in some respect radically surpasses that which is typical of most people living today.

human transformation. Michael Murphy helped organize Esalen Institute's archives on extraordinary functioning, which include some ten thousand studies of remarkable mind/body changes. He used the Esalen archives, as well as other sources, to write *The Future of the Body*, a comprehensive collection of evidence that humankind harbors immense untapped potentials. Working on that project, he came to believe that by gathering data from many fields—including medical science, religious studies, and sport—we can identify extraordinary versions of most, if not all, our basic attributes, among them sensorimotor, kinesthetic, communication, and cognitive abilities; sensations of pain and pleasure; vitality; volition; sense of self; love; and various bodily structures. Every human capacity, it seems, has a variety of metanormal expressions.

Rhea White has assembled possibly the largest collection of case reports dealing with metanormal functioning, some of which she has published in her journal *Exceptional Human Experience*. In developing her archive, she—like Murphy—was inspired by William James; by Frederic Myers, who pioneered the study of extraordinary capacities and was a founder of psychical research; and by Abraham Maslow, who explored peak-experience and self-transcendence. During the last one hundred years, these and other pioneering researchers have created a field of inquiry we like to think of as a kind of “natural history,” in this case a natural history of extraordinary functioning. Rather than studying plant or animal specimens, this discipline identifies patterns of human development by comparing metanormal experiences from all walks of human life, including sport and physical adventure. The material in this book has a place, we believe, in this emerging field of study.

William James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experience* is often cited today, also wrote *The Energies of Men*, which was about energy reserves of the human organism. It is these “hidden human reserves,” a phrase Russian sport psychologists have frequently used, that athletes often draw on. It is our contention that there are levels of energy (third and fourth and who knows how many more “winds”) that only a few sport psychologists recognize. We want to highlight the existence of these energies, give them names, provide examples of them, and show how sport and adventure evoke them. Sport is valued today for such benefits as relaxation and entertainment. It can also show us how to tap our metanormal capacities.

The experiences we cite here represent only a preliminary effort. The more we read through the literature of sport and the more we talk to athletes and coaches, the more we realize that the range of extraordinary athletic states is greater than most people think. Sport evokes mind/body illuminations beyond those we have named. There are sporting "zones" beyond those commonly described by athletes, especially ones involving apparent psychic abilities and contact with the sacred. We now hope, as we did when an earlier version of this book was published, that someone working with people who are actively engaged in sport will gather first-hand examples of metanormal experiences to create a larger and more comprehensive collection.

We also hope that this book will contribute to efforts our readers might be making to extend their own athletic peak experiences to the rest of their life. Both of us are interested in long-term transformative practices, and we believe that sport has much to teach us about them. There are striking parallels between sport and religious discipline, for example, which we discuss in Chapters 5 and 6. As philosopher Klaus Meier wrote, play is liberating and revelatory, enabling humans to "luxuriate in the intense, fully-lived release, if not explosion, of [their] subjectivity." (1116: p. 38)*

Each of us has contributed to every chapter, but Murphy is the primary author of chapters 1, 5, 6, and 7 and White of 2, 3, 4, and the bibliography. In most chapters, we have added new case material. Sixty-two new experiences have been added to those that were included in the first edition.

And we have expanded the bibliography, from 538 to 1550 entries, with the emphasis on scholarly reports, making it one of the most comprehensive listings of articles, books, and dissertations related to metanormality in sports. In addition, 20 percent of the entries have been annotated, including some items in the bibliography of the first edition that we expect will be most useful to students of this field.

* The number in parentheses following a quotation or cited work refers to a book or article listed in the bibliography. If a page number is included, it refers to the reference cited.

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In Germany: Please write to *Penguin Books Deutschland GmbH, Metzlerstrasse 26, 60594 Frankfurt am Main*

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1

THE SPIRITUAL UNDERGROUND IN SPORTS

For many years we have investigated extraordinary functioning in sport—moments of illumination, out-of-body experiences, altered perceptions of time and space, exceptional feats of strength and endurance, states of ecstasy. From personal interviews, books, magazines, letters, and dissertations, we have gathered thousands of these incidents from famous and not-so-famous athletes. These tales are part of a sports underground—stories that athletes sometimes tell each other but that rarely appear in the sports pages. It's no wonder; many such tales are surpassingly strange, and sportspeople often have trouble accepting them.

I (Murphy) awakened to this underground of metanormal experience after writing a semifictional tale about a golf pro named Shivas Irons. The book, *Golf in the Kingdom*, triggered responses I had not expected. In 1972, the year of its publication, many people wrote to me describing their own sublime or uncanny experiences in golf and other sports. Some related moments of surpassing joy or a serenity for which they could not rationaly account. Others wanted to tell me about the unearthly beauty the game of golf had revealed; in the words of a woman correspondent, "All the fairways and greens and people on the course were filled with a holy light." Still others described self-surpassing abilities. A man wrote about an inspired round at his club that ended

with a birdie on the long, uphill 5-par 18th hole. For the first time in his life, he reached the green in two shots, and as he walked up the long fairway, he felt as if he were walking *downhill*. Reading *Golf in the Kingdom* had prompted his letter. Ordinarily, he didn't share this kind of experience. My book had shown him that he wasn't alone in feeling that golf could evoke mysterious states of body and soul, including some sort of levitation! This letter, and others like it, alerted me to the fact that many people have illuminations in sport that they are reluctant to talk about.

Later that summer, a woman phoned to say that my book reminded her of a luminous moment she had while skydiving. She had been caught in a thermal upwind and had ridden her parachute for over an hour several thousand feet above the ground. During that ride in the sky, a ring of light had formed around her, and for a moment it had turned into dazzling figures—figures with human shapes made of nothing more substantial than light. She was a mother and a sensible woman, a practical earthbound type, she said, but her experience had made her believe in something like angels. Could I tell her what they might have been?

I was cautious when I answered. Had she ever had visions before?

She said that she hadn't. Her husband thought it was some kind of hallucination, but the experience had been too vivid for that. No, those figures had been utterly real.

I asked a few more questions, but could feel her backing away, responding to my caution with growing shyness about confiding in me. Finally she hung up without leaving her name or address. That conversation was a good lesson in talking to people about these things. Skepticism can distance you from someone who has had an experience as strange as hers. That's why most sports reporters miss this element in their stories. Athletes will seldom make fools of themselves for the press. To understand these uncanny moments you must approach them sympathetically.

As other stories of this kind came my way, I began to realize that there was a side to athletic experience more complex than conventional sports wisdom accounted for. There was something uncanny about hearing these things, a sense of *déjà vu* that I had felt while watching or participating in certain athletic events. It was as if something secretly familiar was pressing to be recognized, something I had always sensed but could render only fictionally

when I wrote about it. As people began to tell me that *Golf in the Kingdom* encouraged them to accept these uncanny aspects of their experience, I decided to explore this domain systematically. Several correspondents claimed that by acknowledging these sometimes strange experiences they found more excitement and significance in sport. Games, they said, were more interesting than ever if you did not suppress these mysterious openings.

A year later, my efforts converged with Rhea White's. She had had a luminous and uncanny round of golf, and contacted me after reading *Golf in the Kingdom*. With eighteen years of experience in parapsychological research, she brought to our project a detailed familiarity with phenomena such as clairvoyance and psychokinesis and a personal interest in mysticism and altered states of consciousness. She is also a professional reference librarian, and her experience in literary research has enabled her to locate and sift through a huge amount of material. As of this writing, she has read through some six thousand books, articles, letters, and dissertations, looking for incidents such as the ones in this book.

In collecting these stories, we have decided to define sports in a broad sense. Thus we are including feats of adventure such as Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic and Joshua Slocum's solo voyage around the world in the 1890s. Epic undertakings such as these provide some of our richest material, for spiritual experience seems to depend to some extent on the distance a person has come from his or her ordinary habits and on a willingness to give up set responses. Stepping into *terra incognita* by deed seems to trigger openings into the *terra incognita* of metanormal experience. Mountain climbing, distance running, long sea voyages in small boats, and other sports that require a prolonged sacrifice of safety or comfort provide us with more startling spiritual encounters than low-risk games like racquetball or tennis. But low-risk games can become theaters of the occult, too. Arthur Ashe (16) and other tennis players have talked about "the zone," a psychological space in which one's performance seems supernormal. There are times when the tamest games are as fierce and as trying as the ascent of a dangerous mountain.

The experiences we quote are primarily from adults who have spent years honing their athletic skills, but the extraordinary sport experience can occur in youth and even to those who aren't "natural" athletes. Edward Hoffman's collection of spiritual experi-

ences in childhood contains the account of an eleven-year-old Little League baseball player who described himself as not "a very well coordinated hitter." In a game against his league's top team, he came to bat in the ninth inning with two outs, the bases loaded, and his team one run behind. He prayed, "with more intensity than I had thought possible," that he would not embarrass himself. Then: "I let the first pitch go by. Strike one. On the next pitch, something happened. As the pitcher began his regular windup, the illumination on the field seemed to become brighter, and everything became silent and luminous. Everything went into slow motion. I found myself observing—hearing—thinking—with absolute clarity and calm that I was going to slam the ball into right field, and everything would be all right. . . . The pitch came, and the ball floated in as big as a basketball. I hit it squarely and it flew just over the second baseman's mitt into right field. . . . The world went into real time and color. I ran to first, tumbled onto the grass, and laughed until I cried. The runners scored and the game was over." (912: pp. 102–103)

The many reports we have collected show us that sport has enormous power to sweep us beyond our ordinary sense of self, to evoke capacities that have generally been regarded as mystical, occult, or religious. This is not to say that athletes are yogis or mystics. Very few of us approach games with the lifelong dedication and conscious aspiration for enlightenment that the mystical path requires. It is simply to recognize that similarities exist between the two fields of activity, both in their methods and the states they evoke. The great seers of the contemplative traditions have explored the inner life more deeply than most of us, and they have opened up spiritual territories that we may or may not enter. But many athletes and adventurers have followed partway, however inadvertently, through the doorways of sport.

Yet we have found that athletes can be as shy about these things as our Victorian ancestors supposedly were about sex. Some athletes have even denied stories that they had told us on previous occasions. Experiences of dramatically altered consciousness can be traumatic. Most people have trouble accepting metanormal powers and states of mind if they have no context for them, no language or philosophy to support them. We hope that this book will help sportspeople accept their encounters with the sublime and uncanny. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 describe various kinds of extraor-

dinary functioning, including mystical feelings and sensations, altered perceptions, and athletic feats that seem to defy scientific explanations. In the last three chapters, we examine some of the ways in which the timeless truths of our religious heritages, East and West, provide a framework for understanding such experiences.

But when claims are made for the mystical aspects of athletics, there is inevitably a response from the skeptics. Many athletes and coaches are wearied by the notion that sport is some kind of yoga. Marathon runner Frank Shorter, for example, said: "People [say that] running is supposed to produce some psychoelevating morphine derivative in the blood, or it's . . . some sort of religious experience. Maybe it is—but that shouldn't be the main reason you do it. It isn't a major reason for me, or even a minor one. I just like to go out and do it." (231: p. 37)

That attitude, that you should "just go out and do it," is a common one among athletes. There are several good reasons for it, among them a wisdom about talking the spiritual side of athletics to death and a refusal to build up false expectations about it. The athlete's silence about these matters is not unlike the Zen Buddhist attitude: If you experience illumination while chopping wood, keep chopping wood. If there is something in the act that invites the ecstasy, it doesn't need an extra hype or solemn benediction. And there is wisdom in letting people discover these experiences their own way, for too many expectations can dampen the spontaneity and release that are part of sport's glory. They can take the fun out of sports in the name of religion.

For the mystical moment occurs as often as it does in sport in part because you don't have to have one. You are simply there to have a good time or pursue a particularly delicious passion, when suddenly—it happens. Many coaches and athletes know this and therefore will not burden us with exhortations about the spiritual things they are doing.

Appreciating this, we come to our subject with some trepidation. By exploring these events in detail, will we raise false hopes that athletics is a special path to mystic insight? We will respond to part of that question at once by saying no, sport *does not* provide a guaranteed way to metanormal experience. It is not the same thing as religious discipline. Part of its glory is that it is not. Because both of us are avid fans—both as participants and as

spectators—we don't want to ruin the fun we are having by loading sport with unnecessary baggage. Our aim instead is to enhance the understanding and enjoyment of sports by examining these phenomena. For there is some degree of blindness and fear about these things, an avoidance of the spirit in athletics. And this can be as destructive to enjoyment and adventure as inflated claims or solemn incantations. Much that appears to be tough-minded wisdom turns out to be nothing but timidity and ignorance about the awesome human potential that sport reveals.

2

MYSTICAL SENSATIONS

A winner's confidence can radiate like an aura and be a palpable threat to every competitor. Pitcher Gene Conley said, "I'll never forget Ted [Williams] coming to the plate. You talk about a guy putting you back on your heels on the mound. He dug in, and he looked so big up there and the bat looked so light in his hands, and he didn't swish it around, he snapped it back and forth, and he looked so darned anxious, as if he was saying, 'Okay, kid, let's see what you've got.' Confidence just oozed out of him. He took something away from you even before you threw a pitch." (213: p. 203)

The great defensive tackle of the Pittsburgh Steelers, Joe Greene, described the effort required for peak performance as "playing with every part of yourself [with] the will to get the job done." (1198: p. 31) When this is achieved, he wrote, it feels "beautiful. You are going all out. You are full of the desire to succeed. You are full of a feeling of power . . . of superior confidence. You reach a peak in every part of your being. You reach an emotional high, a physical high, all of them together. It's almost like being possessed. [But while] it *is* a kind of frenzy, of wild action. . . . you are never out of control. You have great awareness of everything that is happening around you and of your part in the whole." (1198: pp. 31-32)

An entire team can catch the fever of invincibility. In *Life on the Run*, Bill Bradley described a game the Knicks played against Milwaukee in which the New Yorkers trailed by 19 points with five minutes remaining in the fourth quarter. With fans heading home, Bradley wrote, "Suddenly, we 'caught fire.' Everything we shot went in and our defense held Milwaukee scoreless for five minutes. We won by three points, accomplishing what came to be known as 'a believer feat.' Those who saw it believed in our invincibility. I even think we did." (56: p. 92)

Theologian Michael Novak described this contagious confidence in his *Joy of Sports*: "When a collection of individuals first jells as a team, truly begins to react as a five-headed or eleven-headed unit rather than as an aggregate of five or eleven individuals, you can almost hear the click: a new kind of reality comes into existence at a new level of human development. A basketball team, for example, can click into and out of this reality many times during the same game; and each player, as well as the coach and the fans, can detect the difference. . . . For those who have participated on a team that has known the click of communality, the experience is unforgettable, like that of having attained, for a while at least, a higher level of existence: existence as it ought to be." (362: pp. 135-36)

Joe Greene told Oates that all eleven men on the defense playing with peak intensity is the ultimate sports experience. "You are surrounded with that frenzy. . . . Everybody is at the same intensity. It's a super, super feeling." (1198: p. 32) He added that his Steelers came closer to that level than any other team of their time, but there was only one occasion when every player was at peak at the same time—the 1974 playoff game at Oakland for the AFC championship. Oakland was the dominant team in the league then, but, according to Green, Pittsburgh "got into a state of mind as a team that it didn't matter what Oakland did, they were going down." (1198: p. 32) He added that the feeling during the game "beggars description. The game was on Oakland's home field, in front of their fans, but our intensity was at such a high level, it just didn't make any difference. . . . Oakland only got twenty-five yards running all day. They never had a chance." (1198: p. 32)

Beyond extraordinary teamwork, athletes report other kinds of metanormal experience. Their accounts support each other; men and women in very different sports tell similar stories. Their ex-