

Peak

Performance

\$15.95



. . . and more

Robert N. Singer



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Movement Publications, Inc.
109 E. State St.
Ithaca, N.Y. 14850

Woodstock
19 Oaks Way, Gayton
Heswall, Wirral
L60 3SP England

Woorkarrim
Lot #7 Strathmore Drive
Torquay 3228
Australia

Copyright © 1986 by Robert N. Singer
Production by Mouvement Publications Inc.
Typeset by Strehle's Computerized Typesetting, Ithaca, New York
Printed in the United States of America by McNaughton and Gunn Co.,
Inc. Ann Arbor, Michigan

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ISBN 0-932392-

Preface

Athletic accomplishments each year amaze the public and athletes alike. Theoretically, limits to performance must exist. However it appears that athletes will continue to surpass their predecessors in each sport as long as better training techniques become known and followed with dedication and inspiration.

Of the major contributors to excellence in sport, perhaps the least understood are the roles of mental and emotional processes, and how the athlete might control and direct them. And yet, peak performance — the best possible for the athlete at a particular point in time — evolves from the harmonious interplay of the mental, emotional, and physical. More and more research on techniques that can help the athlete to get ready and stay ready for practice and competition is being conducted by sport psychologists. This information is extremely useful for coaches and athletes. It is being incorporated into the training regimens of athletes, influencing the level of skill they attain.

Getting the most out of what we have is dependent upon the ability to develop and refine all those personal resources pertinent to and appropriate for a particular sport. In this book we will explore peak performance, and how to attain it, from a psychological perspective. The basic approach is to (1) identify the most relevant considerations, (2) explain how they work, (3) suggest techniques that the athlete might use to improve upon the way they function, and (4) show how performance can thereby be enhanced.

However, the use of the term, peak performance, is oftentimes misleading. Coaches tell athletes and athletes tell themselves that they need to shoot for that ideal state, for that *one* optimal performance. I disagree. Peak performance is an achievement level to be realized at one stage of development. But it is transient. At least it should be perceived that way. Human potential, at any point in time, has no limitations except those which we impose on it. Peaking should not be looked upon as a terminal expectation, but rather as the fulfillment of potential at some stage in a program.

All too often techniques to train mental and emotional processes are not taught to athletes. It's as if they are to intuitively acquire appropriate coping procedures. But there are practical and useful approaches that can be incorporated into any training program. We are not dealing with a non-tangible and mystical substance. Rather, we can put into operation useful techniques to address concerns of athletes, concerns that might otherwise be barriers to success.

The greatest impact can be made on young athletes — those individuals who are in the formative and sensitive stages of development. They need to acquire effective coping skills in order to learn and display athletic skills to the best of their advantage. Experiences in sport will be much more fruitful and rewarding if there is a perception of an ability to control thoughts and emotions relevant to skilled performance.

It is hoped that the material contained herein will assist athletes in dealing with themselves and competition. Indeed, limits to performance may be set

more by psychological barriers than any other kind of factor associated with athletic proficiency.

The reader of this book may be a young or mature athlete, a coach, a parent of a young athlete, or any person interested in sport. Therefore sometimes the material will be presented directly to the athlete, and sometimes it will be related to others. It is hoped that rather than confuse this approach will help to keep everyone interested.

Appreciation is extended to Dr. Bonnie Berger, Dr. James Cauraugh, Robert Rawlins, and Bernie Waxman for their constructive comments about the contents of the book. Likewise, I would like to recognize the Tallahassee Democrat, Dr. Jack Groppe, and the Florida State University Athletic Department for making numerous photographs available for publication, as well as Shiela Salmela for her furnishing the artwork.

This book is dedicated to my wife Beverly, without whose love and understanding I would have been unable to devote the appropriate amount of writing time. Thanks for allowing me to escape from chores around the house, but I guess now I have run out of excuses. Finally, I can't say enough about Publisher Ed Burke for making it a pleasure to prepare this book for his company.

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CHAPTER ONE

IN QUEST OF EXCELLENCE

Through the centuries we have by necessity been forced to overcome barriers in order to live, and to live more comfortably. Hard work and creativity have made this possible and will continue to do so.

Humans also create obstacles and challenges in order to determine and master certain abilities. Sport, in its diverse forms, represents our inventiveness in testing our capabilities. The degree of satisfaction attained depends upon these capabilities and goals set, as well as on experiences encountered along the way.

The highest of goals associated with becoming among the best in a sport can only be realized by a few. But the quest for excellence is also a relative matter, in that personal achievements can be compared to those of others possessing varying levels of expertise. We can analyze our performance with those of individuals in the same age group, of the same sex, going to the same school, participating in the same athletic program, or according to some other criterion. There are lesser scales or standards of reference of excellence in performance, as well as supreme tests.

Furthermore, personal present accomplishments can be compared with those yielded on previous occasions. Each person participating in a sport program can improve and achieve to a reasonable degree. The key ingredients are reasonable functioning resources and continuous purposeful effort. The highest levels of proficiency in a sport are reserved for a few by the very nature of the rules of sport and competition standards. Yet the possibilities are endless for all of us to continue to improve, accomplish, and feel a sense of satisfaction as a result of our involvement in sport.

In this book we will explore approaches to getting the most out of sports training and competition. But the emphasis will be on *psychological considerations*: the use of the *mind* and *emotions*. The best athletes have maximized their personal resources related to their particular sports. Yet, for the less gifted as well as the elite, there are always resources that can be improved upon. The psychological preparation for competition is often neglected or misunderstood, leaving many short of their potential. When you finish reading this book, this no longer should be the case.

Major Considerations

It is readily apparent that many factors need to be considered in order for one to do well in sport. With higher levels of competition, the considerations become even greater. Adequate nutrition, health, body composition, and conditioning are among them. Likewise, knowledge of and the ability to execute specific skills and tactics in the context of competition are necessary prerequisites for achievement.

We are also increasingly recognizing that an athlete's readiness and reactive

state before, during, and after competition can greatly (if not immeasurably) influence present and future achievements. It may work for or against the athlete. When everything functions optimally, we witness *peak performance*. When this is not the case, the result is impaired performance. Performance level may be considerably less than potential — for a prolonged period of time or on various occasions. But peak performance should be viewed as a temporary level of performance realized at some stage in the development of the athlete. There may be higher and higher peaks to be attained, depending on potential and approaches taken to training and competition.

If all variables were to be reduced to simple considerations, we could suggest the following model for continuous (with understandable ups and downs every so often) effective performance in sport:

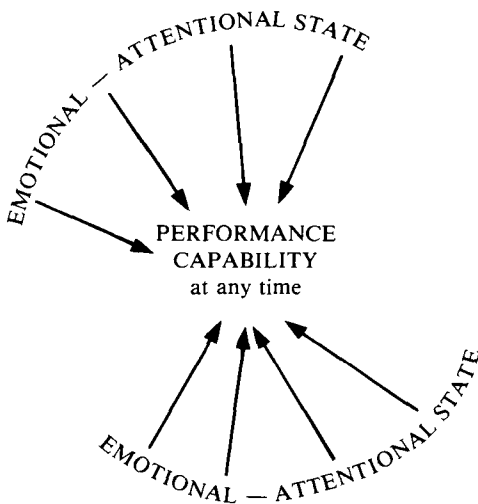
INTENTIONAL STATE: motivation, goals, purposes

EMOTIONAL STATE: arousal level

ATTENTIONAL STATE: focusing ability

Most of the material in this book will center around ways for the athlete to be able to determine his/her best functioning status. At any given time, the production of what appears to be best performance is dependent upon the presence of an optimal intentional, emotional, and attentional state (see illustration). What this is, how to get there, and how to stay there when appropriate, will be addressed throughout the book.

It's amazing how many world-wide athletes are as successful as they are in spite of their inability to deal as well as they might with personal and sport-



Emotional state and attentional focus influence performance potential.

related problems. We can only speculate about how many athletes limit themselves due to factors other than skill and conditioning. Certainly, average athletes could achieve much more when they learn how to control and direct their thought and emotional processes.

Psychological Contributions

Each sport is unique. Each makes special demands on athletes. Consequently, the psychological approaches associated with proficiency in each sport must be identified. They need to be developed effectively. But there are problems or considerations in common associated with just about every form of competition. The following are typical concerns associated with thoughts and feelings as expressed by many athletes:

- How to deal with anxiety (fear) before an event
- How to sustain motivation (to “be up”) for practice sessions and each competitive event
- How to deal with setbacks after less-than-ideal performances
- How to learn how to focus attention effectively
- How to develop and know when to use habit-like or adaptive behaviors
- How to prepare mentally for an event
- How to control and direct emotions during performance
- How to maintain competitive intensity
- How to deal with the communication style and decisions of the coach
- How to feel like a part of a team and contribute

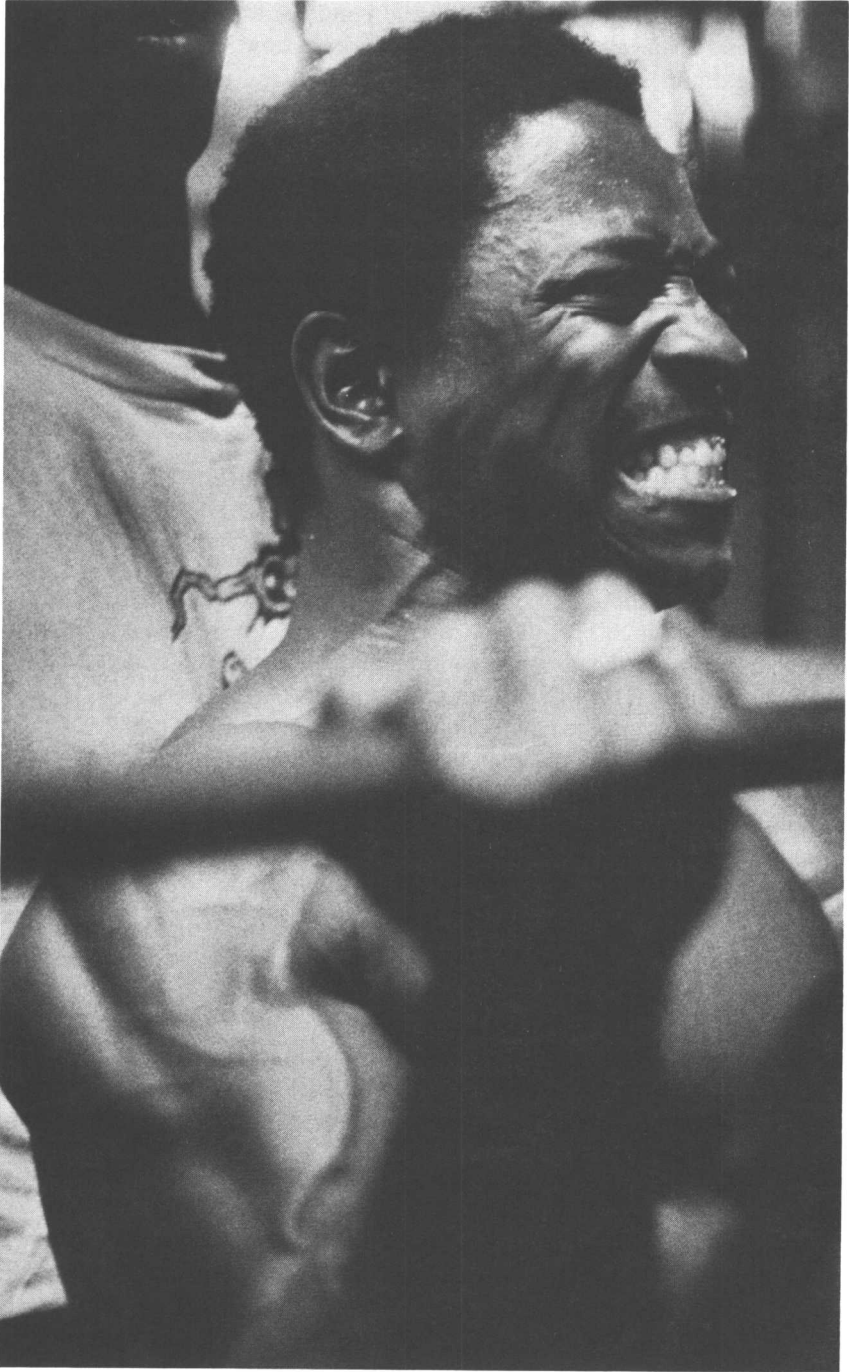
The list could continue. Being able to resolve these and related concerns permits an athlete to come closer to the realization of skilled performance. It's all part of the mental and emotional preparation for sport and the exhibition of peak performance.

Personal Resources

Superior athletes are successful because they have put everything together: performance skills and strategies, health and physical fitness, and *skills for managing psychological processes*. In turn, these processes influence performance skills and tactics. There is always room for improvement in the use of psychological processes, and therefore, performance can improve as well. But coaches typically deal superficially with such psychological considerations as motivation, anxiety, and attention, whereas athletes oftentimes deal with them under great distress.

Like fitness and health, and a knowledge of how and when to execute a movement in sport, the ability to direct psychological processes effectively represents another variable associated with achievement. Our *personal psychological resources* influence the way we practice and train. They affect the degree and frequency of success attained in competition. When athletes develop the ability to put themselves into an optimal readiness state for performance, and maintain it during a contest, execution is most closely compatible with physical and motor capabilities.

These resources underlie and support skilled performance. They are asso-



“Superior athletes are successful because they have put everything together.”

ciated with establishing right attitudes (a readiness) toward practice and competition; maintaining concentration; overcoming potential competitive anxiety; and, in general, monitoring progress and personal psychological status. In other words, learning in practice will be minimal and performance will be below expectations if the athlete is not psychologically prepared to achieve. The ultimate desirable situation is when we learn how to:

- analyze present capabilities and potential objectively
- diagnose the performance readiness state for each occasion, as associated with realistic expectations
- control and direct energies as appropriate
- evaluate progress in performance objectively

If we learn to help ourselves, to attain optimal psychological states to train and compete, a major deterrent to achievement is overcome. The best dispositional thoughts and feelings to perform need to be identified for and by each person. Any conflict between the ideal and the less-than-ideal must be resolved. As young athletes become more mature and experienced, and develop self-analytical and problem-solving skills, this circumstance becomes more possible and probable.

Getting Ready for Competition

When using psychological resources to advantage, practice/training is more productive, the mental/emotional state in preparation for competition is more ideal, and performance during competition is more allied with physical and motor potential.

Training for competition starts far before the event itself is begun. Practice sessions on occasion should simulate the real contest, requiring athletes to deal with competitive stress, to focus attention, and to maintain competitive intensity. Various techniques, to be described later in the book, can be tried to determine those that work most beneficially. For instance, many anxiety reduction techniques are available from which to select. Each athlete can find the program that is most suitable.

Additionally, routine patterns of optimal behavior need to be established the evening before, the morning just prior to competition, and even after competition is over. It's probably not wise, unless necessary, to experiment during the athletic season. The mind and emotions have to be trained as does the body. A good mental-emotional preparation program used consistently during the pre-season period will pay off handsomely later in the season.

This last point cannot be overstated. The mental preparation for sport includes activities that can be designed to be followed at home or elsewhere, as well as in the sport environment. As athletes learn to be more in control over themselves, wherever they are, self-esteem and ultimate athletic performance improves. They, and you, can acquire strategies to:

- improve athletic performance directly
- manage personal emotions associated with competition
- cope with personal problems and crises
- deal with others, such as teammates and coaches



“The ability to direct psychological processes effectively represent another variable associated with achievement.”

Many possible strategies will be discussed in this book. They all lead to *peak performance*, the goal of every athlete. And peak performance expectations can be raised higher, as long as personal orientations are not changed toward and restricted to only one event.

Many athletes who were believed to be at their peak at one point in their career have proved the experts wrong. They continue to improve. Wayne Gretzky, premier National Hockey League player of the Edmonton Oilers, is one such example. Winner of the League's Most Valuable Player for each of his five playing seasons, he holds or shares thirty-six NHL records. Believe it or not, Gretzky is only twenty-four as of January, 1985.

The question raised quite often about Gretzky is: How much longer can he sustain himself? Is it possible for him to improve? His coach believes he can. Coach Glenn Sather said, "He's still improving. Just when you think you've seen it all, Wayne comes up with a couple of new moves. . . . He scores goals nobody else dreams about."

Peak Performance

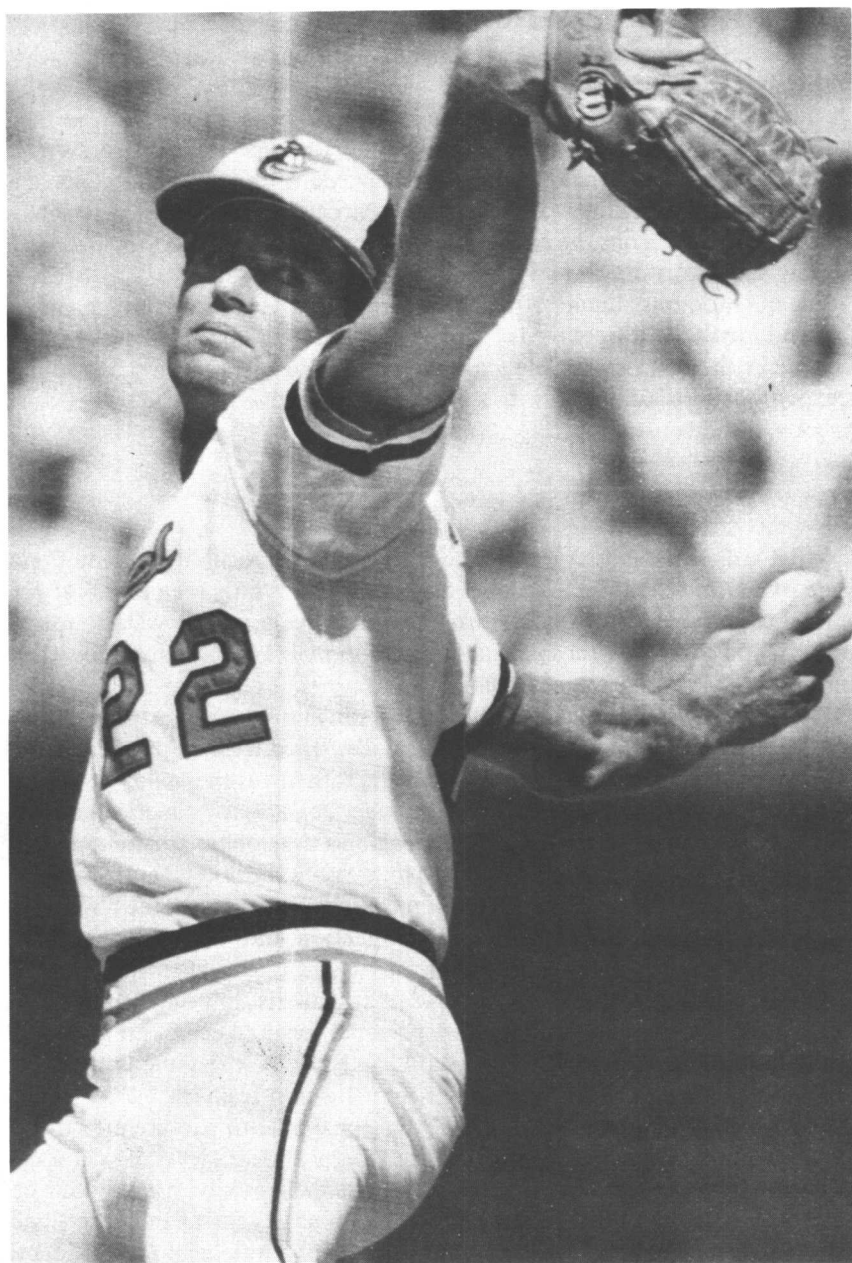
What athlete would not want to be in that ideal physical-mental-emotional *state of readiness* each time competition occurs? It is only then that best performances are experienced. Performances improve as athletes learn how to train — and control — those mental and emotional processes that allow them to do what they are capable of doing.

If the athlete is in excellent physical condition and health, has trained properly, and has mastered the appropriate skills, the difference between being satisfied with performance and almost being satisfied is the ability to use the mind and the emotions to personal advantage. Peak performance can only be realized under these conditions. The young and developing athlete especially has much opportunity and possibility to improve as the body matures, experiences are productive, and mind/emotion control is learned. In the absence of burn-out, drop-out, boredom, loss of motivation, and the like, the criteria for peak performance for each athlete may be adjusted higher and higher.

But the process of attaining excellence in athletics is slow, challenging, and demanding. Patience and diligence are personal requirements. Just as it takes much time to acquire performance skills and tactics, the same is true with regard to attaining mastery over one's thoughts and feelings.

The ultimate objective is *consistency* in being able to execute effectively. Peak performance, or excellence, is related to the athlete's level of skill. Peak performance is demonstrated when ideal personal resources have been developed and used as a perspective for sport training in general and in conjunction with each competitive event. Consider the psychological factors identified on the chart.

As we can see in the chart, continual effective performances in any activity depend on the presence of a number of ideal personal qualities related to success. They will be discussed in Chapter Two and throughout the book. Performance skills reflect not only that which has been learned in regard to movement execution, but also the ability to get ready and remain in the right



*“The ultimate objective is consistency in being able to execute effectively”
(as Jim Palmer demonstrates for many years).*