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## FLOW IN SPORT AND COMPETITION

Today we are going to look at the second section which is flow in sport or what we call the zone. I want you all to look at this image and again notice what is happening, how are you feeling? Body, mind, if you like the word soul as you look at this image which is of course, of Vinesh Phogat. What is coming up for you? This way of discussing flow, it is an image of an elite athlete, in this case who just completed and won at a tournament. And as you see this, pay attention to look at her legs, can you see this strength, can you feel this strength, how is her body language? So, she has folded her arms, how does it look? Notice her spine. So, why am I showing you this? Of course, this is after the event, that is a question which might be coming to you.

The simple reason is also to tap into what happens and what is the energy after a flow state because we are still in that state or after we have completed a process and we have been in a state of flow or we are really happy with what we did. And then what we do, when we imagine when athletes imagine they tap into this, what is the feeling when I perform well, how does my energy feel, how does my body feel, how are my thoughts, am I embodied right? and that is exactly why this image we would like to start with today okay. So now, this is a quote by one of the cricketers that I worked with and I asked him, "Can you give me a quote now describing what flow means to you?". So, he said okay doc I will try and it is really succinct and it encapsulates what we are looking at.

I am going to read it out really slowly and what I would like you all to do is again tap into what comes up for you not just cognitively, but also body, thoughts, emotions, feelings, right. So, I am going to read this quote for you. "Flow state is one of those subjective experiences that is hard to put into words succinctly. For me flow state means the ability to remain in this moment, blurring everything else. Although I have never tried to blur things deliberately, it just happens because of the intensity of your focus on what is happening in the moment."

Pay attention to what other words which are standing out for you as we are going through this quote. “Whenever I have been in flow state, it has been extremely enjoyable. It is like being in trance, like having your noise cancelling headphones on in the middle of a busy street and your favourite piece of music is playing. There is so much happening around you, but you only hear the song. Every time I have experienced a flow state, it has never been deliberate. When your focus narrows enough, you get into a flow state.”

I am going to pause a little here because I really want you all to just go through this slide again. Read the quote in your mind or maybe a little loud so that you can hear it and catch the words, catch the tone, catch the feeling. What is really standing out here? ‘Not deliberate, being in the moment, enjoying it and narrow focus,’ but in tune, right? In tune. And in sport, the flow state is also called ‘the zone’, right? And I remember when I started my career early on, I was very influenced by this researcher, Dr. Yuri Hanin, who gave the ISOF theory which stands for the Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning. What do we mean by this? So, a Dhoni zone is going to be very different from the Virat Kohli zone. So, when Virat was becoming or going to become the captain, there was a lot of comparison or he should be like Dhoni, he should be like Dravid, he should be like Sachin and I think that is a very unfair comparison to make because each one is different. Let us take tennis for example, two of the tennis greats, Federer and Nadal. The Federer zone is going to be very different from the Rafa Nadal zone, right? And we cannot tell them, Nadal no, you be like Federer, no, Nadal is Nadal, Federer is Federer. So, now, how do we identify? Before we get into how do we identify, I also want to explain that when, especially young athletes say, oh I want to be like Virat, oh I want to be like Neeraj, oh I want to be like X, Y, Z, I always say it is good to have a role model, but also what is very important is look up to them. But also identify what am I, what is my personality, what brings me to my zone, that is very very important. Let us say your temperament is a little on the aggressive side, which works well for you? And then you say I want to be like Dhoni, which is great, but you also need to ask is my aggressive style working for me? And how do I emulate, what about Dhoni can I take?

Now coming back to Mr. Hanin and early in my career, I would ask athletes after their best performance? So, how is it? Oh, ma'am, it was just perfect. Oh, doc, you know, “I do not know”, okay, but it is a I do not know, which is very happy I do not know. And then you get a lot of these SOS calls, which goes after a, let us say, bad tournament or one of the worst tournaments and they say “I just do not know what happened, I collapsed, I do not want this to happen”. And sometimes this is an SOS just before the next tournament. So, if you notice, the “I do not know” is on both ends. So, on the happy side, it is a “I do not know, but it was great”, okay? On the underperformance or like low performance, again it is a “I do not know”, So, then what do we do? So, before I

say how to go about it, I am going to ask you, recall your favourite sporting event or memory, okay? I would like you to recall your favourite sporting event or memory. What was it? How did you feel?

Take a second to write down, what did you feel about the energy of the group? Were they in sync? Were they in harmony? And what was happening to you? What is happening to you now? As you recall, maybe your first initial thought would be, oh my God, we won that match. Oh my God, for example, Dhoni's World Cup 6, right? And then get into the nuances, how is his energy? How was the team atmosphere? What was happening in the stadium, when they started? I recall seeing that interview of Dhoni where the entire stadium started chanting Vande Matram and he remembers that is just something which I will never forget. That was just something else. So, get into the details, get into the details of it. I remember watching it. I just finished my PhD and came back and I could not sleep. We had all gone out to watch and then of course, you had to rush back home so that you do not get caught in the chaos. As much as fun and everything, it can get a little chaotic. But I could not sleep, I just kept replaying, I replayed the match in my head, on the TV, everything reliving the moment. Okay, so this is what we do even in other sports.

We actually go, how was your tournament? They will say, "oh great, it was, I do not know, everything was perfect", then we start racing. Wonderful, so how was your energy before? What did you do the previous night? How did you enter the stadium? How did you enter the tournament? Do you recall what you were doing? Do you recall what was happening around you? What was the energy? What was the thought process? What was your ritual? So, this becomes very, very important when we want to consistently tap into what is bringing an individual to his ideal zone? And then what we do is, this is what we try to tap into time and again? This is like the cricketer's quote, the previous quote, it may not happen every time, but once we know what are the qualities we try. It is like cooking a dish, one of your favourite dishes. It might turn out a little different each time, but then what are the qualities, what are the ingredients? That is what we try to do and also what is very important and now I am going to ask you to recall one of your unpleasant sporting memory, of your favourite team or individual and what happened and again notice what was happening to that team or that individual? What was the energy? Were they closed? Were they open? Was it a tight match or was it your expectation? And once again look at what is happening to me now. So, this is what we do with athletes. Because as much as they do not want to think, I remember a tennis player very recently, he was, he had a really long injury, first one knee, second knee surgery, so it would be an awesome tournament for quite a while and when we were working through the process of getting into the competition, he was quite ok. He started quite

well and then the pressure builds up, “oh my god, but this went wrong and I do not want this to go wrong and at a point of time I felt choked, so I do not want this.”

Do you realize just even as I am talking, what is happening to me, there is this rushed sense, there is this rushed breath. So, there is a catastrophe which the individual is imagining. So, what do we do? We hold them, right? We process it and go yes, this is what happened and as much as I do not want this to happen, we do not know if that is never going to happen, but what you recognize is what were the things which were not working for you. What did you do? Because you were definitely nowhere close to this one. And that is very essential because a lot of times unfortunately with athletes they go, “dekha jayega” we will see about it, we will think about it and that is not how it works. You have to be, this is what works for me, this is not something which works.

When I am flowing brilliantly, I continue, but also to recognize am I in my center, my zone, we call it a bubble in sport. In cricket they call it the bubble, in other disciplines they call it the circle to recognize am I in my center or am I not in my center. It is something which Djokovic very recently said that it is too much pressure to expect to be in the moment all the time. That is not going to happen, but what is essential is instead of beating yourself to be in the centre all the time, I have come out get back into the circle. So, when I have athletes beating themselves up, going “I should not have done this, I should have done this etcetera, etcetera.” I always tell them that listen we are in the process of becoming Buddha, we are not yet Buddha, right? It is a work in progress. So, that is very essential.

I want to give this example of this young Indian athlete who is doing very well at the world stage. So, initially he was a little on the anxious side. I will take you through the process, ok. So, I remember there was this one time where a little bit of his technique was changed and I saw him just the day before he was leaving. In fact, I think it was that night he was leaving, and if this is the table. He came and I am like so as usual, ok so “how are you? what is happening?” and he is like, “I am ok ma'am, I am ok” and he came like this literally, his hands were on the table, his face was this close to me and you can see the anxiety, but what he is saying is “I am ok, I am ok”. So, it took almost 5 to 7 or 10 minutes to calm him down.

Just saying calm down is not going to work, ok and if I get agitated as to ok what are you doing just sit down what is going to happen, what am I mirroring? The same thing. So, what do we do? I have to become that mirror which can aid in stabilizing his nervous system, because his sympathetic system was on an overload,

and your stress hormone which is cortisol keeps kicking in. So, and then that tournament went pretty ok. So, then once this athlete has calmed down, basically you sensory orientation and calm them down of course, there are different modalities you can do and then process ok listen “yes we know the techniques change, there is no expectation. Why are you pressurizing yourself and with this overthinking and overdoing and over pressurizing you are actually not even giving yourself a chance”.

If you can process and get cognitive only after the individual has come into their body, only after the individual is embodied or connected to themselves. If not, what happens, he was in his head at 10,000 miles per hour, the mind has just gone off somewhere else. So, that is very essential to remember. So, then what happens is so this is an athlete I have been working with for a while. So, we were discussing one of the tournaments and I remember, we were going through and he said oh it was fine and I won etcetera etcetera.

This is how they will see, and then I said ok “what happened?”, and then he said “oh there was a delay in the match, it was in Chennai, the event and then it started raining”. And I started noticing that as he started speaking about it something about him calmed down because if not he is like “I am ok ma'am I just wanted to talk to you, I just wanted to touch on this” and then I said ok and then he said “though my body cooled down, because it started raining I still performed”. So, now that is a cue for us. So, then I went ok. So, what is the association with rain? What is the possible association with rain? And then there was this really big smile and he said “oh I love the rain it is like I come from a hotter belt as well and we would play in the rain we would enjoy.”

Then I said ok and he remembered he started narrating one of his one of the times when it started raining with his friends and he made this hand stretched out gesture. And he said I just opened myself and if you see, the energy is open. You are connected to something beyond you or actually to nature to something in you which actually helps you calm down and this is a guy who is a little on the anxious side. So, water, rain, that element was helping him calm down. So, that was a key “aha moment” to aid him to flow. So, I said “brilliant. So, once you do your ritual, you warm up and everything, maybe this is a gesture you can do, and connect to that feeling”. And the next tournament he said ma'am nothing “I just did that you know, I just did this (Stretched hands)”, but it also has to resonate with your athlete, the individual. So, and this is an example of how you always listen to what is that narrative, what is that story because you never know at which point a key element may come to you. So now, can you see this beautiful image? I felt like giving it the title ‘how can I get his record?’ because this is an example case study in fact, of a young age group swimmer, ok. So, I had been

working with him for a while again and with younger athletes it is very interesting because there is very less conditioning that has happened with him.

It is easier, because you do not have to decondition, and then condition. So, he had drawn before the state event he was very clear he drew an image. I am on the podium. I won the state championship, bang that is what happens. And then it was the session before the nationals and there was just a little bit of time, ok. So, we were processing ok state championship went so well, brilliant etcetera and then what about the next one. So, we know you do goal setting.

You have your current time and your target time. So, since this was an age group swimmer obviously, there were quite a few events and in three events, his current time and target time was practically the same. let us say for example, it is 1.12 your current time, and he would put 1.11 or 1.09 or something, but this was very very close and then I said “what is happening here?”

And he said “oh I cannot go less than that, because then I would be beating Aaron D’souza's record”, and Aaron D’souza as we all know is one of India's elite swimmers. So, he has seen him as a boy. He has probably seen him sometimes at the pool at an event. So, this is a much larger picture in his head. And now this is probably the one time that I am going to see him before the nationals. Now, if I kind of go oh come on you can beat his record and all what am I doing? I am going to be probably hitting either a wall or his defences or worse it might be getting through, but you know there is a block. So, because there is an unconscious belief there that I cannot beat his record because he is a top or elite Indian swimmer.. So, what do we do? Remember in the Milka Singh movie, he puts down the exact time of what he wants to qualify. What we say in psychology is if you want, let us say 40 seconds, and I am talking this specifically for athletics and swimming. Then you go 40 and less than. Because then you are not setting a time for your brain, you never know when you hit that space, that zone and the possibilities are immense, like what we saw with Neeraj doing for India, right?

I said, “ok keeping your current time, your current fitness level and what you are capable of, put it down accordingly. I am not talking about you beating Aaron's record” and then he put it, any guesses as to what happens? So, he goes on to beat two of Aaron's records in the next meet. So, this is why it becomes very important for us to identify what actually blocks us, and sometimes a lot of it is very very unconscious. It is really not conscious and when we are working with someone that is something we look to identify and as we

draw close to the end of this section what I would like you all to start noticing and looking at is what could be your blocks, your unconscious beliefs.

What is that story you keep narrating that becomes very important to keep in mind and as we keep going into different sections, especially in different units and even in this unit we will start looking into possible ways that you could look into and work around, yes.

Now, we are going to move to strategies for developing a flow state. I want you all to look at this beautiful image in front of you and I am going to give you a couple of minutes to also recall your best performance. Was that in a sporting event or in any other performance domain? Remember we are all performing. We are all performing every day in different different ways and as you do that I want you to recall what was your energy prior, who or what impacted you, how did that event or performance affect you, move you, move your audience if there was an audience and at the end of it what was the predominant feeling for you.

You do not have to write a big long story, I want you to just put down some keywords that you can build upon. So, some of the strategies that Dr. Mihaly, the flow researcher that we discussed in the first part, remember, what he suggests are these four. So, he gives around four traits which are self-leadership, challenging yourself, play and creativity and focusing on strengths. So, what is self-leadership? I will give you this example of a young age group swimmer.

I met him after someone else came and this kid, the other kid, was doing really well. So, a lot of time what happens if one athlete comes or one swimmer or one individual comes and starts performing then you have a lot of parents saying -oh. They bring their kids and this was a boy's basic assessment running low on all the psychological traits and for me the biggest red flag was his motivation. The minute I see motivation in low that is the cause for concern. So, I asked him something that I always ask is "why did you take up this sport, what do you want?" And then he said, "oh you know", he comes from a family of awardees. So, he said if I am not wrong I think he said "I want a national award, national medal". I said "ok" then I started "so, what do you enjoy about swimming?" and it was difficult to get anything out and then I saw the tendency was moving towards the challenges, "it is so difficult to get up in the morning". "I do not like swimming, I know I find it painful" and this was also towards winter, ok. I am talking of a kid in a Bangalore pool. Bangalore winters are quite cold and bunking swimming, I was kind of going - nothing really seems ok. And this was a very young child I think if I am not wrong he was just hardly 13 or 14. So, I had to call the mother in and go whose dream

is this really because this child really is not enjoying the process at all and and and in fact, he seems to be burning out.

As difficult as it is, it is also very important for us to actually educate parents sometimes. I said “give him a break or take him on , take him somewhere, let him come back refreshed and and then see if this is what he really wants to do”. Now, why am I giving this example because one of the traits which is essential is self-leadership. How do you come to a state of flow? when I hear younger athletes say “oh, coach wasn’t there , so we had a lot of fun, we bunked the sets and all”, which is really nice , it is that age, but then I ask “what is it that you really want? Are you running or are you swimming for the coach? no right?”. So, your coach is not there, “how are you becoming your inner coach”. It is not always about another leader, when we work with teams we are looking at a leadership group, but also what we are looking at is each individual becoming a leader from within that is what a true leader does. So, going with this is where I would want to bring in Abhinav Bindra's example where the first time he did not win at the Olympics. He came back and pushed himself, he practically emulated everything that happens in Olympics, all the pressure that one can possibly experience in Olympics especially let us say at the finals. If you read his book ‘A Shot At History’, it is wonderful , as to like what he has done he even went for commando training in the US because it is supposed to be one of the toughest training. So, this is what self leadership is. We always see that “oh wow! we got a gold over someone won or someone we do not”, but to understand that journey, because flow is what you also do every day if you look at all the entire sections that we have been discussing yes it is wonderful it is beautiful the feeling when we have a great talk, a great tournament, a great event, but there has been a lead up to it and one of the very essential qualities that we see is really self-leadership, right and Abhinav Bindra is a prime example of it.

The second that Dr. Mihaly says is challenges ok. So, how do you challenge yourself every single day I want to give this example of this Taekwondo player ok and earlier in my career I used to actually get the family especially the parents if especially they were below 20 years and it was a session which came through let us say the parent or the coach not an academy because in an academy you very rarely have access to the parents. So, this was a young family, a father mother, this Taekwondo player and her younger sister and in that session you actually get an idea of the dynamics of what is happening and the mother did not let anyone else speak. So, that is the first session where I say “ok, you can talk”, or at least I give them time to talk for around 25 to 30 minutes because I need to get the history of what is, what to understand, the beliefs, to understand the story and where this individual is coming from and then I sat with her and I said so, “why did you take up this sport,

what do you want?”, and any guesses as to what she could have said she said “I want to make my parents happy”, which is great ok which is really great. I said “ok, that is really nice” and this is a young kid, 16 years, but it was definitely a first timer for me then I said “ok, that is really nice ah, ah very heartening and what else do you want to do in your sport?” and then she said “whatever my parents want”. Now, again this was a very talented child, but remember the motivation was coming from outside.

The parents, especially the mother would say “you have to motivate her”, this is something we get a lot of in psychology and then I said “ok, what do you like?” and this was, a little girl on a little chubby side. She was just in her teens and there had to be a little more maturity from her side, but she was just a child honestly and she said, “oh I I love pizza, I cannot eat and then I am so scared this that this causes so much injury.” So, there was a little bit of maturity which was needed from her mental level, but what was really sad was that every decision was taken by the parent, which is fine, but I think after a point it also needs to become combined, like does this child really want to? and I remember the mother would actually push me to going “the only day she is free is Sunday. So, you have to take the session on Sunday.” So, I would say “I am very sorry, I do not work on a Sunday” and I said. “you know you will have to start giving her some responsibility for her to embrace the challenge to become a little more responsible”, because motivation is not just saying come on you can do it, right? She had to and her tuition was the next street and the mother would practically go and leave her. So, there is a little bit of a control over here for in and with a very good intention from the mother, but in the long run it is not going to help and I discontinued after a while because I was travelling quite a bit, but she did not continue for long. So, what is very important here is this child or this athlete could not challenge, you have to start challenging yourself, right? Going alone to the tuition next door or next street is pushing yourself. It is not just about what you do on the court. It is about what you are as an individual. Do you like challenges? Are you very scared? Are you very timid? I remember once a tennis parent I gave a talk for tennis parents and then one of the parents got the their daughter and they said, “oh she is a perfect daughter, she does everything, she listens to us, she is so quiet, she is so good but she does not have aggression on the court.”

I said from, “where will she get aggression right? It is not just that she is going to come on the court and start jumping in, screaming or getting that aggressive mindset.” What you are as a person is also going to determine and that does not mean that you go around shouting and screaming no, but the point is are you, what is the right word, are you ready to take challenges, are you ready to push yourself that becomes very important. Because then what the brain takes is ah I have done this oh this is ok. What Bindra was doing he was challenging himself continuously. So, then the system does not go into a fight-flight-freeze, typical stress mode

in a state of utter stress or pressure like what we saw happening at Rio Olympics like most of the athletes every time I kept hearing I am going for gold I am like oh my god and they collapse because you do not put that kind of pressure at the last minute upon yourself.

One of the aspects that a lot of athletes forget is play and creativity. It is not easy being an athlete. Michael Jordan actually says, "I just don't work out for hours to taste what is sweat, I am doing it for a reason", but also you should also know how to make it different like here we giving this course; how to make it different, how do you bring in images, how you bring in activities? So, that I am just not sitting and giving a lecture right? I need to enjoy the process. we are having discussions with colleagues, the experts coming in. So, how are you bringing in play and creativity like sometimes you hear an athlete, it is clogged, their energy is flat and that is where I go "what are you doing for yourself? How are you going to make this engaging, are you being playful?", because that energy that it brings is very very different. So, and you see coaches do like it is the same training, but then how can I make it different?

What are you doing, where you are bringing in play and creativity because that really opens up your horizon. It is like what you see with some of the gymnasts. If you see their pregame routine it is total enjoyment because you are in that space. I remember one- just before, the judo tournament which recently happened at IIS. I consult there. So, they put up one of these videos of this young judoka who has put on her headphones and I think she has some people around but she is preparing for the finals and she is in this state of bliss, playing, enjoying, getting ready. Most people, remember, they go "oh my god, I have to be serious." if serious works for you, brilliant! If that is how you are, but music opens us up, nature opens us up, what opens you up? Be in that. Because, if not, if you just being robots, 24x7, the energy is flat. Just think about it, maybe your best performance previously, how were you? let us say one of the times where for whatever reason you could not prepare too much, but then you were in synergy right, you had a good time and then you go give yourself the best chance probably you did well.

How are you going to bring in play and creativity because that is very essential for flow. In fact, even Neeraj Chopra recently gave a statement saying "you sometimes need to have fun as well", and one of the things I think his coach told him before the Olympic finals was "Jake Maje Karo yar", which is "go and have fun". Because it is fun does not mean you are not going to win. I think we put them on different ends, but I think you can have fun and you can enjoy and you can still win. Just knowing what works for you is very very essential and if not maybe during a tournament you probably like to be in a different space and zone at least in training

at least when you are preparing. How can you make it fun? How can you play with that energy right? Look at kids like their energy is so different. Possibilities are endless because of their creativity and imagination.

And the last, but not the least what Dr. Mihaly actually recommends is to focus on strengths a lot of times you will hear an athlete going oh this is what I want to win for India I want to do this I want to do and or tournaments coming I want to win this and and the potential is there to win and then you say oh what if this guy beats me, oh what if that happens, what if she does this. So, focus has gone on the other, they are not going what am I strengths, always come back to your strengths and build on it, that is very very essential. So, these are some strategies and to me I really feel it is what I remember hearing Sakshi Malik once say that you know an Olympic gold medal, right? She won the bronze medal at Rio is something every athlete dreams of and also what is very heartening is a kid in rural India comes and tells me, “Didi, aap ke waje se, I get to train, because of you”, that is so inspiring. I feel and that is where an athlete moves from being successful to inspiring.

What are you doing? Why are you doing this? How is it impacting you and how is it impacting another? So, hold that. What would you want your mantra to be? And then also I feel that some of the inner processes are connections like we discussed, to yourself, to nature, to those close to you and really to have passion because then you become a hero and who is a hero? heroes are agents of change. So, I finally want to bring this section again together with the reflections that we had looked upon because we are going to be concluding the section on flow. So, now that what is flow, I want you to really take the time as we finish this section and understand and look at it. it is not that you need to give the answer in one day, when do I enter a state of flow? start putting it down, how is my energy level? Which is unique to you, what aids a sense of connect? it can be something which no one else connects to, that does not matter. Today, have I been in touch with myself and entered a state of oneness? Are you giving yourself time and what touched me? How can anything touch us if we do not make that time, if we are just busy bodies right, and finally, take one step today to tap into the flow state. I would like to bring this section on flow together with this beautiful image knowing that you can give wings to your dreams. Thank you.