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PRACTICAL APPROACH TO FLOW STATE: DISCUSSION

Welcome, welcome to this section. We are going to be discussing flow. What is flow in sport and flow in competition and understanding it a little beyond also- just general flow state. We have with us Ms. Priyanka Prabhakar. I am delighted to introduce her. She is the first women sports psychologist who actually travelled with the team.

It was the women's hockey team and I am sure we definitely want to know a little bit about your experience there and connecting it to flow. And the rest we will get to know more as the discussion begins. So, welcome Priyanka. Thank you ma'am.

I would like to first begin with what was an aha moment for you. It does not necessarily have to be in sport. Let us begin with an aha moment for you in your life. Okay. And when you are saying aha moment, can you tell me more about it? So, it is that spark that click you just know you are flowing.

I know it probably is a juxtaposition of the word flow many times. But when things are just in synergy and symmetry. Right. So, it could be at any point. What comes to you? I am sure there must have been a few aha moments.

But what comes to you at the outset? I think multiple situations come to my mind where I have felt extremely happy being in that particular situation. Maybe I can describe the characteristics of that particular situation. Maybe I feel more energetic when I feel in sync. I feel that I can handle the situation. I think I am capable of managing this particular situations.

I feel more calm. I feel more slow. So, what you are saying is you are actually in the moment. Connected to that space or that energy center. Yes. Yes. Absolutely. That is the way I feel. Awesome. And now let us get into let us talk about aha moment with your athlete. And maybe even I will share then. Yeah. So, can you tell us an aha moment with your athlete? Okay.

I have heard multiple athletes talking about how they have felt and what has really given them that energy to go out there and perform. Some of them have spoken about how being with friends has made them so comfortable and being at ease. And then that has given them the energy to go out there and perform the next day. Some of the athletes have spoken about how when they listen to their favorite song gives them that energy and uplifts their mood. That is one of the things.

And I also remember working with a group of athletes and the coach, we were having a session with and the coach ended up speaking about each of the athletes strengths.. That day. I feel so good just listening to it.

Yeah. That day was so amazing because we all saw the kind of performance that the athletes delivered. That is the state of flow. So it is beautiful that you include the coach because he or she is one of the most important person or figures in the entire sports ecosystem. So when one talks about one's strengths which is what I mean Dr. Mihaly the flow researcher says is you focus on your strengths and especially when it comes from the coach. It has such a significant impact. It is like you will form this circle and you all were in that state of flow. So that is a beautiful experience.

That is a beautiful example. Thank you so much for that. Yeah. Yeah. As you are talking what comes to me is that I am training to be a Jungian analyst. And I will give this example of one of these golfers. Very young golfer. And he would be like every time his session would start, he is like what should I do. I want to do this. This is done. This is this. I would feel like I would feel choked and this was a young golfer who was doing, who was very talented but he was inconsistent which is what we normally hear in sport right? Like this inconsistent performance.

And the main reason was of course it is pressure if you look at the entirety of the situation. But if you tease it down it was because this guy would not come into himself. Would not allow himself

to touch flow. And so I will give you this one example where he said he met one of the top Indian golfers and he said so he suggested start reading.

And I mean read so many pages. So the next time I met him he said what ma'am he said this. X said this. And I started reading five pages every day. I said oh great okay that is great advice.

I said, "Can you tell me the gist of something you read yesterday or today?" What touched you? It is a blank expression. Right, and that is when I said listen for me it does not matter if you are just reading one chunk one paragraph.

But pick up something. Is this touching you? What is touching you or what is irritating? Or does something inspire me? And that is where you get more in touch and more in sync and more in synergy. So now this was this athlete. Okay so I call him this do do do do do. And with him he is like every time he is like what should I do what should I do? And I am like please do not do anything.

There was this one session okay we then I think that would probably touch on like our role as sports psychologist is we were having this discussion and again and this was a guy who was very much in the head and that is exactly what we are trying to say with flow is, it is embodied, your mind and body is together. It is not just me being in one state and like my mind is running hundred miles per hour. So there was this and I was taking him and as Jungians we work a lot with images and also being in tune with the field. like now you and I are also talking so there is this space the field that we are connected to. So with him normally that was what and my whole aim would be to calm this guy down and it would be almost like his BP is just shooting up and to bring him down. And there was this beautiful session where I think that was an aha moment for me and especially with someone who is so cognitive, which is I think one of the challenges for us as sports psychologist and I said okay took him through a little embodied, through a little bit of centering and I said, "call upon an animal which you feel can aid you in what you are looking for, be that in performance or energy wise.?"

And immediately what came to me was a horse. And I kept quiet, like now this is what has come to me and then he said, "I want the energy of a horse" and I said, "this is exactly what came to

me.” And we went into the characteristics of the horse, what could aid and what he would want to take and that was a flow, that was being in synergy with this athlete. And I think as Jungians we call this the analytical container because it is what you pick up in the field. So with him I would always be picking up rushed but what I needed to bring in was a little bit more of homeostasis, a little bit of centering and for him to call upon this call it the power animal or the animal which gives you energy which can aid his performance.

Thank you, thank you for that example where you brought in the coach talking about the strengths and the coach being so open because there are examples of the opposite of flow which we both know but we will stick to this, this aspect of it. Awesome. So have you felt that some athletes touch themselves a little more, are more connected to themselves and are able to come into a state of flow. I won't say easily but they come into flow let us say consistently. What do you feel in your experience? Yeah I think of course it depends on how aware the athletes are of themselves.

Yeah and how much work they have done on understanding because I think from what you have spoken previously you spoke about how we are all separate yet connected. So how we can touch each other in different ways. So I mean I know that there are athletes the more they are connected to themselves they are also connected to others. So they know that they don't have to pick others' issues and make it their own. Wow yeah yeah I love what you're saying because I was working with one of these elite teams and it was a little bit of a slow start if I may say but one of the senior players so he is a very quiet guy but he started doing this exercise, like this clapping and then you start clapping in sync.

For example if I clap one two, one two.

Yeah, so we came into a state of sync and synchrony and balance and then that kept increasing and what happens is also if you see we were talking so we kind of in the head the minute we got into this, we got in our bodies as well, right? what you said, because it just shifted the mood. So we had a bit of a slow start, yes, whatever and the team is down, but then what do we need at this point of time? So what's going to bring us into some state of connection? So I think that's what

Dr. Stephen Porges is someone I think we both adore and who gave us the The Polyvagal Theory theory.

One of my favorite quotes of Dr. Porges is - safety is not just the absence of threat but the presence of connection. And I think that's a beautiful thought connection you brought in Priyanka because if you look at elite sport, athletes are so disconnected but teams that come together are those who can connect despite the differences, despite the setbacks. There's this really nice book which says that tournaments are won in the locker room, matches and tournaments not in or on the ground. What do you feel about that? especially maybe you can connect it a little to your experience with hockey, if you would like. Yeah and I feel that so many of the teams that I have worked with, I know what happens before they go in for the tournament, the kind of energy that they go with really determines the moment of the match.

Oh definitely yeah. So basically so many times what happens is coaches can just predict whether the athletes are going to win or not really going to perform based on how their energy levels are, how are they supporting, how are they connecting, are they talking more to each other. Every single thing they just know. They are feeling very lethargic. That's also probably because some of the athletes are feeling anxious on the team and that gets reflected on the field so much because you know they're more in the head they're thinking about the mistakes. Yeah and that's when you see more of a tunnel vision because I'm focusing on myself and that's where probably the mirroring comes in right.

I remember one of these teams that I was working with, this athlete and he was a bowler okay. He would talk incessantly when he's anxious. So there are critical moments in the match. And imagine there's a batsman who needs to go in or there are two of them and they want to focus. So I had to tell the bowling coach, listen, this is one of the concerns that we need to look into. Are you going to be okay? Because also there's a particular way in which the coach also functions. So he said okay don't worry I got it I'll probably pull him out and I'll probably ask him to throw a few balls or something like that because then, that field that you just spoke about, stays intact and also to give credit to this bowler right? He's aware of it. So he said I don't want to do it but this is what happens to me.

Then I went in okay so now that you're aware what can you do? You need to pull yourself out of that situation so that it doesn't affect you or can you go to someone who can actually help you calm down and come into a state of flow. So that's a brilliant example. Yeah yeah. So, now I'm wondering as we're talking, do you think there's a correlation between athletes' state of mood, athletes who are content and coming to a state of flow? I mean they may not be able to get into flow every single time but, does it aid coming to that state? What do you feel? Yeah I think definitely there are different layers of the same flow is what I feel to different levels of flow. Yeah, Yeah. So basically like you can see that some athletes are more in tune to themselves and to their sport.

They're extremely connected and you see the way they perform out there because they are mainly focusing on their process and they're not really worried about the result and like for example I think Neera Chopra. Yes, that's exactly who came to me, to my mind. If you want to say or would you like me to go ahead because I think with Neeraj, starting from his Olympics and the most heartening thing was his coach telling him, he said in his interview, "jake maje karo yaar". How many coaches do you hear say this? Not just coaches, how many parents? because I kind of feel being in that process the message that goes to your brain is we're fine. Right? So, your sympathetic system does not need to get overloaded and does not need to go get ready for war. Right, and I think he's one of the best examples for following the process.

Because, I think that's the mistake a lot of athletes go through and especially if we remember the Rio Olympics which was a catastrophe for India. Every time I heard an athlete going I'm going to go for gold I'm going to go for medal I'm like ah because that's something we tell ourselves or athletes need to tell themselves go for gold all that is fine before not as you come in because that's what you're trying to say about the process and I think that's exactly what he probably told or I think what he said. Yeah he was telling that, I was only focusing and visualizing my throw. I did not really think about the result part okay and it is so necessary for the athletes to practice and flow is of course a process. There's a process which is involved that you have to follow in order to get into that particular state. It's not like it just happens whenever you want it, it's hard work to get there. Exactly it's you've been doing that hard work you've been preparing yourself for, what you're saying actually reminds me of one of my favorite quotes. I think it's by a caddy who tells a golfer there is a perfect shot waiting for you all you need to do is get yourself out of the way.

Wow, that's a very beautiful quote. Yeah because what he's actually saying is there's also a similar quote by Osho which says- to use the mind you first need to get out of the mind. It's because there's so much of psyching negatively or that what will happen oh my god, unwanted thoughts unwanted self-talk which then again triggers the sympathetic system, whereas what we've been discussing and the flow really is you're in the right balance you can't be totally low right. Rafa Nadal's zone is going to be different from a Federer's zone but then we can't tell them no, you need - what works for me, what are the factors which work for me right like what you were saying about Neeraj right which is what we see. I think with Neeraj what he's instilled really is that hope and that focus on what is important at this point of time yeah that's really the key because what Dr. Mihaly also says is that moment is what's most important. Absolutely and I think as you're talking about it I'm only thinking that there's so much pressure that athletes face right and let's take any particular tournament there are so many spectators watching athletes and it's very difficult for them to probably get into the state of flow.

Yeah if we remember what happened to Simone Biles I remember I had to go on air and then I see so many comments and I was just looking up what was actually being said, some were people supportive or people not supportive and people were comparing that she's not mentally tough. We already know how many medals she's got you can't say she's not mentally tough but the thing is and something she said is what you're saying that we are talking of not just the spectators over there which probably was lesser during Tokyo Olympics due to COVID but then if you also look at social media these days because what she said was she said the number of people tweeting tagging you before an event especially like Olympics is insane right and the amount of pressure that adds. I'm sure this is what we do, I in particular ask athletes to get off social media especially leading to a major tournament and most of them actually do but what I tell athletes is who are you in connection with, is this person is this particular aiding you because then you don't want to be getting psyched negatively. Absolutely, and also when we keep focusing in terms of - I have to probably live up to this person's expectation, that person's expectation. It's going to be too much. How many people's expectations are you even going to live up to? it's quite tough for anybody for that matter and then your energy is getting invested everywhere and you don't have any energy for yourself more than anything. Yeah I want to give this example without naming which team it was but it was one of the leagues not the cricket league I've also worked with other leagues, it was

this very high profile team and a lot of who's who on the team and I remember someone in the leadership group right like without taking names again so he's like, said go with no expectation so this was the first culture session okay and he said just go like don't expect you're going to make a big impact right in the beginning and I said that's not what I'm thinking I mean, as Psychologists most of the time we get this, I mean now it's little better and I said no, the aim is to aid the team and of course I'd met all the players even when with teams I always meet each player so I kind of know. I felt the energy in the room opened them up with a little bit of fun then a little bit of images, activity, reflections and one of the elite players, one of the top players, said this is one of the best sessions I've had. He said it openly and and it was also very heartening where they started opening up, one of the senior players was like I'm sorry there was a bit of miscommunication with some information and all that and, at that point of time right and it was a men's team again and I was the only female but all those differences just seem insignificant right. and it felt like what you were saying, this circle of trust was beginning to form. I think for me that's been one of the most heartening sessions because I really experienced flow and and I have to say I was talking about the elephants at one point of time and I was connecting it play and what I learned and I was in the center and the group was this awe, I could see that awe in the players and at that point I felt even as a psychologist, Priyanka, I was accepted I felt we were one unit. These are the times- these flow states, these are beautiful states that we look to establish as a psychologist and then I think you even stop being a psychologists there, you become one unit.

And I like the point that you made that how playfulness is important quality that we have to cultivate and that can aid the flow process yeah oh that's beautiful yes that's that's really been a gift from the elephants to me because that's absolutely true I want to bring in this example of this very young athlete, very chirpy. So I ask athletes which animal do you connect to, and I think at that time I was also wearing a dolphin ring and she's like oh ma'am I love dolphins and I said okay and as we were coming closer to the competition you start seeing her shrinking and there was this seriousness. Then I said what's happening and she said oh I need to get serious because the competition is coming close and you just realize how my body language is changed as I was just describing it as whereas when I was describing that flow state it's much more open and I was trying to help her understand that listen, then how your brain is going to interpret it is there's pressure that's where you're creating angst, when sometimes I remember a particular athlete, especially someone like Virat who's so animated right you see him enjoying on the field and that's

just him, really the energy is open and I'm not saying everyone needs to be like that but then let's say the team doesn't perform, then people are going to say oh you were dancing before yeah absolutely how does that matter. I'm just wondering what is the connection between play, like for example if you're having fun there is an assumption that probably you're not taking things seriously. I love this because I think this has been one of my biggest challenges to help athletes realize that you're not at war, just be yourself, like we are enjoying this discussion imagine if you weren't and we're just sitting like this (closed body language) and having a straight face then we really not engaging right, and and that's exactly what I see with the elephants and what I also see with teams which are a little playful and there are going to be some some players who are a little more open maybe the extroverts and where you can bring in a little bit of play even in, let's say your warm-up and music. We all know Terry Orlick has done so much work on music and performance because you're opening up your system. And the exact opposite of this Priyanka, because this girl's coach who would act, for a lack of a better word, be like they have to be like this, like the Academy was almost choking me and I said - listen there needs to be some breathing space there needs to be fun because if not, they've become robots. And I think there's a misconception that psychology sessions are going to be very boring but then that's not really true because we like having fun and we will make the sessions fun and I have seen, when whenever there are activity based session the players are of course having such intense schedules, when you bring in that they feel that oh I'm so relaxed. It does make a lot of shifts and also because it's what we are mirroring like they're anxious and if you just say - okay don't be anxious, don't be stressed; it's not gonna happen right. It's really also your personality, I mean okay our personalities are quite similar. It should help an athlete ease. Maybe someone may be a little more serious, that's okay but the point is you help your athletes ease and also connect to their own core self. I think that becomes very very vital. I have to give this example of one of these elite cricketers, and this was a meet and greet session in one of the tournaments and so it was like everyone had to meet the psychologist. He came in and you could see body language fully tight okay like this and and of course you sense it and you kind of just go okay tell me a little about yourself and all that and then we also had an elephant connection and all and most importantly his role, right, the session went on for around 40-45 minutes and then at the end of it he said oh this wasn't so bad. His body language was so much more open and I was honestly shocked and then I said oh is that what you were expecting and he just shrugged and laughed and he said okay doc, see you next time. That was a moment of connection we found which started with rigidity but then it flowed through and I

think that's what we try right Priyanka, as you know as sports psychs. Because in the previous chunk I was actually talking about Michael Phelps, the 200 meter butterfly in one of the Olympics with practically being blind but point was now that was a situation which could have ended in like catastrophe but he flowed through. Yeah so recognizing what aids you to flow and also how can I shift so, first recognizing is my body language tight can I feel my breath all these become very important and I think it really connects to what you spoke about, are you enjoying, yes just your very essence of your being. Apart from that you also mentioned certain things that if you're more in your head then what happens and if you're more embodied what happens, yeah so these things definitely contribute to your well-being as well as to the performance. Yeah, definitely and that's something Dr. Mihaly says that there you're totally embodied. It's like when you see a really good performance, let's say an art where the doer and the act has become one and then the audience also come together. So this artist she's working with which is again performance, so she also brings in the group together. I think that's also what we are trying to do here. These are recorded but I think we are hoping that the audience too actually come into the field though we may not be able to hear what you're saying but that's exactly what it is. So me picking on Priyanka, Priyanka picking on me there's a field here which is within us but if I get into my head like she was saying then I'm disconnected firstly to myself so then maybe Priyanka has to pull me out. Yeah and then probably said, first to bring me to the state of nowness and hereeness and then maybe what brings me to flow. I remember this one situation where one particular athlete she would overshare whatever is happening like for example if she's anxious she would go around telling everybody saying I'm anxious and I'm anxious and I'm just thinking of it as you're speaking because that was affecting the energy levels of the team. So then, there were certain guidelines which were issued in terms of who you can go share it with. Yeah, exactly everybody is not affected and not right before a competition. Yeah it's interesting, I know one of the swimmers Indian swimmers and he shared this in a group session but I still don't want to take his name but he said - I would go tell my opponent, I'm gonna beat you right and left, I'm gonna.. and then, I've also worked one-on-one and he said - ma'am that's how I deal with my anxiety, and I'm like oh wow. Then the younger players in his club, they're like I'm going to tell people I'm going to be like him; I said well do why he might be saying that? Of course I couldn't go and say the reason but I said to some- why do you need to say that if you're already full? Also like this girl you were saying for her to also recognize, that am I sharing maybe helps me feel better but is it really helping the group and is this something I should go talk to the psychologist or maybe the coach, but not like pull the energy

down. Absolutely, and I think that these reflections are so important and what you are saying, I have to say a lot of times when I hear athletes, I'm here. There was once this athlete who was injured and so I said and this was a recurring injury, okay, so I said what happened last time? How did you cope? And I'm sure they experienced this as well and she was just breaking down her schedule. So, I said just listen to yourself, your voice is flat, the tone is flat, there's just no energy, and where are you forming that connection? then I said what was my question first of all? so one of the things that I actually asked athletes to do especially I think I didn't start with the intention of bringing them to the flow but I think this is one of my favorite topics as you know Priyanka, I think what helps people really connect and come to a state of flow is to form deep connections with yourself. I think that's very important in terms of what makes you more connected to yourself because if you cannot connect to yourself it's very difficult to experience that. Yeah yeah. So I first ask them and then they're like oh you know the first thing they'll tell you is I'm so busy, I'm like I'm sure you can take 10 minutes out of your day for your own self and something I asked them to do is go for a walk and connect with nature because I feel they're so disconnected as human beings from what's happening around. With these very athletes who are following a timetable to the block, I also tell them you're going to take five minutes, close the room, play some nice music and just dance like no one's watching and get the energy out. Yeah, it's very very important to switch-off, I always say, including us. I feel like we're on a pressure cooker. Absolutely yeah, how do you know that it's reached a certain point that you need to switch-off because I think you're not in flow then, yeah. Is that a question you asked me? yes yeah. I can actually share this, so I was part of the COVID bio bubble 2020 right, I at that point of time and that was the first bio bubble and as beautiful as the experience was, I think like a lot of people have said being in the bio bubble is difficult, there's a lot of restriction and you're away from your family and it's constant constant talk of just what's happening there. So, I had this rule with my friends and family you will not talk about the league, you will not talk about anything to do with any ex-player, any player like the seniors of the team, and most importantly for me to realize and switch off my phone, switch off answering why is this guy playing, why is this guy not playing, can I get ticket ta-ta-ta-ta all this. Trust me Priyanka, and the lights are very bright but I really feel like you also hold so much for the team. I loved the experience but I also kind of felt I needed to take time to recharge and I had an offer for ISL the Football League and they wanted me to jump from one bio bubble to the next immediately and I said no, I'm sorry I have to take care of my mental health, I have to take care of myself and I'm actually so glad you asked me this because I don't think I

would have done justice or been able to flow, had I gone to the next league and even there with the management, there were certain times when I would say like, okay if it's just a playful match like let's say beach volleyball or something. Sometimes I would say I just want some time because I am an introvert and you know you need to recharge, so I think that's very very important. In fact I have to mention this this I was in the panel once, it was on the discussion of being in a bubble, there was another very senior psychologist without taking names and he was saying oh we should do everything that we preach and I was just thinking, I wish this gentleman would have asked me because I would have said listen it's not easy, I kind of feel it's very essential also for us to take care of ourselves and also to recognize that we are human too. Absolutely and you won't be able to do just, exactly, the work that precisely and of course you're not in the state of flow when you're drained. Yes, exactly. Where is the energy going to come from? and it was very again SOS some of the leagues take time to bring in the psychologist and I remember my sessions would sometimes go to 10:30pm and stuff, and then one of the days, this gentleman who is coordinating he said, oh why don't you take a session like at 11 o'clock, you can see one more player and I said can you look at how I'm looking. I mean and I think people don't realize they think that you're just talking, they don't realize there's a lot of energy exchange, there's a lot of processing, I need to be, we need to be in a state of connectedness with yourself, with the other person and the field, if not it's then you're just talking from the head you're not in a state of flow. Absolutely, yeah yeah. I think this was a really good point, really good discussion. Yeah. Is there anything else you'd want to add? no, I think it was very very nice. One last question I had was, how do people practice flow in difficult situations? yeah, I think here we can take in like those who've been performing like let's take Abhinav Bindra. Abhinav Bindra I think is a really good example because his first Olympics he didn't make it, he didn't win right but he came back and went with what is needed, what are the challenges? How do I prepare myself? And in his book, A Shot at History, he actually talks about going, I think he goes for commando training and going with, if I can handle this, then what? But I also kind of feel, to get in touch with yourself, get in touch with nature, have those moments where you've also been connected to yourself because you experience flow, so your system knows what is flow and also connecting to this energy. I'll give this example, I think it's a beautiful example, so this was a young athlete who's doing very well at the in at the international level and he's a little on the anxious side, so one of these tournaments we were actually looking at okay you know tell me what happened and and he said it was in Chennai, it was very hot and then it started raining, I said okay, and then he said though my body cooled down right I performed

well. so that was the cue, right. so I said okay let's look into this there's something over here rain and association and nature at the end of the day and then he went to how he loved rain as a kid and he started talking his body language started opening and there was this moment where I caught a glimpse of that little boy he said I would love, he literally did this (opened arms), he's like I would love playing in the rain, getting drenched. and I said hold that posture, and I'm like this is what you want to build in, the next time I see him after the next tournament he said this is what I did ma'am. oh. so that's for us, I'm always listening to what's the story behind the story and I think as important as it is for us to prepare for challenges like what Phelps did, but also what Neeraj said, focus on the process, what gets me to the process, and if you know we are involved somewhere, is tune in, catch what probably, it was just this like a glimmer over there, of what can help this person connect deeper because when they get in what we need is to get the parasympathetic back in action, calm them down. So here the rain and then the body, embodied. so this becomes important along with handling and pushing challenges. I think it is very very nice and it was a very thought-provoking and very insightful discussion. Yes, thank you. I think it actually flowed through. it really flowed . We had some thoughts and questions but we were also very open to, let's see what comes up in the field.

Thank you so much Priyanka, this was really nice and we hope you'll enjoy it. Thank you.