



IMPROVING PERFORMANCE IN GOLF AND OTHER SPORTS

In my work with athletes from many different sports representations there are some universal principles that apply to all sports. Some of the sports represented were amateur and national competitor figure skaters, gymnasts, tennis players, track and field contestants, amateur and professional hockey players, Olympic skiers, equestrians, golfers, swimmers and divers. The pressure and stress that comes with any competitive sport can result in the undoing of whatever technical ability and even longevity of experience that an athlete might possess. The pressure and stress of competition interferes with the mental and emotional controls necessary in order to compete satisfactorily. It can create an aura that makes the athlete lose track of the “game plan” that needs to be upheld in order to compete...in order to win.

The problem is no different for each and every competitive sport whether an individual sport such as tennis or figure skating or team sports such as hockey, baseball or football. The process of these factors interfering in an athlete’s performance is the same in all of them. If the competitor cannot control the manner in which they THINK, FEEL and ACT on the field of competition, something has to suffer. Essentially, the need to focus is a universal “given” in all sports. Without focus, all of the technical and practice training is for naught. When I watch sports, I try to watch the athlete’s eyes which tell me how capable he/she is to maintain focus in order to execute their roles. There is an element of predictability when and why an athlete loses that sense of control resulting in a missed play. Of course, there isn’t 100% accuracy all of the time and it’s not a gift that I possess. It’s a sense of the feel of an athlete’s performance, thinking processes and focus ability. Is it that predictable? I believe it is...yes. There’s a sense that can be viewed through the athlete’s body language that “tells the story”.

A HOCKEY STORY:

I remember working with the Buffalo Sabres Hockey Team. There were about eleven players who were being considered by their Coach of either being “benched” or traded if their play did not show improvement. I met with the whole team in the dressing room and explained who I was and what I proposed to accomplish. We agreed that I would be able to work with the group of players both as a group as well as individuals. It was also agreed that I would be able to observe the team in play from the Press Box.

In working with the players we went into several different aspects of what I call the Mental Side of their game. Their anxiety and fears around the possibility of their being “benched” resulting in problems focusing, the effects of their plight on their families, doubting their abilities, having lost the joy of having a “feel for the game”, thinking about what they were doing too much vs. their “instinctive play” were just some of the issues that were discussed. I trained them to use deep relaxation before every practice and game as well as some techniques to use on their way home after games or practices so that their relationships with their families would not be jeopardized. I worked with them primarily as a group and some players were seen individually over the period of twelve weeks.

One of the main characteristic features that was noted that tended to influence their play was a lack of passion and having fun for the game. They were able to move into a deep relaxed state and to “re-live” their playing “pond hockey” as kids. I wanted them to bring back all of the “good feelings” that the memory of those times held in order for them to re-experience that same sense of having fun. My contention is that “the greatest learning we experience is when we don’t know we’re learning and when we’re having fun©”. Overall, my observations showed that there was a significant improvement in their attitudes, play and general performance which was substantiated by their Coach.

THE STORY OF AN EQUESTRIAN:

An equestrian in her mid-twenties approached me after having spent a great deal of money on technical training lessons to improve her riding because she was not placing as well in competitions as she or her coach believed she should. Upon talking with her and getting both personal and athletic histories, it became clear that her expectations of herself were creating considerable anxiety which she was being transferred to her horse resulting in disruptions in what otherwise needed to be a natural flow of movement in order to perform with excellence in the ring. This pointed up the principle that an athlete’s mental state...in this case her anxiety level...can affect our bodies and even be transferred to others with whom we have contact. In this case it was a horse but I have evidenced the same thing occurring between humans as well.

After several sessions with her around teaching her how to use relaxation techniques which we designed just for her, in ten competitions, she placed first in seven and second in three of them. In addition to the success she experienced in the performance of her sport, she began to train herself to maintain more reasonable expectations of herself in living her life. She had attained more than she had hope for.

A “MANLY” GOLFER’S GRIP:

A competitive golfer came to me after spending considerable time taking lessons for a problem she was having with her putter in her inability to improve that part of her game. The problem was assessed by her professional coach as being in her grip resulting in buying new clubs, new grips and changing her putting grip. I asked her to shake my hand and her grip was very firm...much like a man’s. I chastised her and said that she needed

to be more “lady-like” and gentle. Naturally, she was insulted but I needed to get her attention because she was still on the track of needing more lessons and equipment. In talking with her I sensed that she enjoyed taking risks and was a bit of a “daredevil” as well as someone who needed to be in control all of the time.

Once her attention was gained, I told her that I wanted her to give me a putting lesson on her home course. She thought this to be strange but complied because she was curious as to what to expect and, certainly, she wasn’t going to let me “win”. In the lesson, she worked with my stance, head position, “reading” the green and, finally, my grip. I intentionally gripped the putter with a “death grip”. I told her that this grip always tended to insure that I was going to succeed. She asked me to loosen it but I continued to ease up just a bit each time. She ended by chastising me indicating that I wasn’t receptive to a necessary change. Clearly, she was very frustrated with me. I said that I was frustrated as well and asked that she show me how to do it. I set up five golf balls at different locations and distances from the cup and told her that I would watch while she stroked each of them into the cup.

She started off gripping her club tightly as she usually did but, because she knew that I was watching intently and wouldn’t be put into a position of losing control, she began to relax so that by the fifth ball her grip, stroke, etc. was very relaxed. She missed three of the first five puts but interestingly holed the last two balls as her grip became naturally relaxed. She gave a big grin when she finished and said, begrudgingly, “OK, I get the message”. We did some more work in the office around the use of relaxation techniques previous to her putting. Later on in the season, she wrote me a note of thanks indicating that she will always remember me and that the techniques I taught her worked consistently.

A Brief Biographical Sketch

After an over 40 year career as a professional psychotherapist and Director of The Sports Stress Clinic in Amherst, NY, Charles Bonasera came to Florida and decided to use the benefits of his previous professional experiences in his new roles of Consultant in Life Management and Business Coaching as well as his expertise as a Motivational Speaker. He once again became involved with athletes in different sports training them with his techniques to help them develop and maintain focus as well as staying in their zone. Much of his training methods are derived from the CD collection he developed under the heading of WIN-WIN SECRETS as the President of Personal Identity Controls. This collection consists of thirty-six programs dealing with vital issues in the management of stress.

Another role that he adopted to add to his professional career was that of Author. Early in the 1980’s he wrote Guide to a Life Management Process which he has re-written as a workbook to successfully help people manage their stress which includes his own Working Model. As a result in his interest in golf and realizing that it was

essentially a “mind game”, he wrote The Mental Side of Golf which can benefit the beginner as well as professionals playing the game of golf.

He then compiled over five-hundred sayings that he had developed in the course of his professional career as stimuli to help people change patterns in their lives entitled How to Stay Well and Live Life to the Fullest. This was followed by a book documenting case studies around disruptive life patterns including ways to change them under the name of How in the Hell Did This Happen to Me? Both his personal involvement in sports as a participant, coach, manager and in his role in officiating, inspired him to write a primer for parents and coaches entitled The Legend of Little League.

Charles invites you to view his website at www.charlesmbonasera.com as well as to write with your comments and questions to his e-mail address (charles@charlesmbonasera.com). He would also be very happy to communicate with his readers by telephone should they desire. His professional motto is “seeking alternative methods to happiness” and wishes those touched by his words to practice the three secrets to a happy life: “enjoy life and enjoy it thoroughly ... develop and maintain a sense of humor ... bring as much love into your life as possible.