

The Art in Sport.

“The ability to create sporting performance”.

It is generally believed that there are many aspects of sporting performance that can be explained by science and that many sporting performances can be pre-planned.

I consider that there are so many unpredictable and random aspects in many sporting performances that the ability to adapt and perform in such chaotic environments is one that can justifiably be called artistic.

The experiences of the athlete, coaches, mentors and a detailed study of a particular sport will reveal many of the situations that can be encountered during any given event. Many situations can be thought about in advance and solutions sought. The ‘what if’ questions can be asked and often answered. This leaves a minority of chaotic situations in which we then rely on either luck or creative ability to maintain a performance. The odds on the ‘luck option’ are often not good, leaving the athlete’s intuitive abilities to determine the outcome.

Many sports require the performer to execute skills that they have not practised exactly. Think of a surfer on a breaking wave, this is the first and last time this particular wave will ever hit the shore, it is unique. There will never be another quite like it, yet a world class surfer can make it look like he has been there many times before. A tennis player receiving and returning a 120mph serve often has the ability to perform incredibly well, even though this particular serve from his opponent has never been seen before. A footballer makes an excellent pass on a wet, muddy and rutted pitch to another player, from a position marked by a defender, in circumstances that they have not encountered before. How is this all done in such an apparently chaotic environment?

Athletes, in common with the general population, draw heavily on previous experiences, even though many of the situations that occur in life have not been previously encountered. As humans we can be incredibly precise with many of our skills. Those skills that are practised, and the athlete’s intuition and experience, often combine to provide a seamless high-level performance. This ability to improvise in any given situation is often called instinct. With so many modern sports being relatively unnatural, how can instinct be part of the explanation? Have we evolved in such a short time to be able to play so many modern sports to such high levels?

As athletes perform they are constantly making decisions, adjusting movements and often remedying any bad situations to maintain a credible performance. An F1 driver is constantly adjusting the power applied to the rear wheels, to not only go fast, but to stay on the track. The car skids at times, the driver reacts by adjusting the power, and or the steering, this is done with extreme precision and skill, not only is the result of the event at stake but also often the driver’s life.

The answer to some of these questions lies in the fact that most sporting decisions are taken with an estimation of what the outcome will be, based on previous experience. This

experience is not necessarily specific to the sport. It is only by practice that athletes may become better at estimating and therefore needing fewer corrections during the performance. Many technical performances require constant remedying and adjustments to any given situation. The best performances often have fewer corrections and more of a positive drive toward a goal or finish line, both technically and physically. Exact outcomes to many techniques in sport are very rare. As the athletes' develop their ability to predict the outcome of a particular course of action, their performance improves markedly. When things are happening too fast for reactions to follow it is this prediction process that takes control.

Many unforeseen situations in sport may not be negative, but rather a positive opportunity to excel above one's competitor. Many competitors at an event will experience the unexpected and after the event ask, "if only I had done..." It is those competitors that make the best of any given situation who will prevail.

What can be done to optimise performance in any given situation? Make a clear distinction of what can and cannot be planned. Plan all that can be planned thoroughly. Planning what cannot be planned is a major mistake and often leads to uncertainty and confusion in the athlete's mind and eventual performance.

- Have intense periods of concentration and mental rehearsal prior to performing. (Many athletes then find it better to relax this mental focus just prior to performing in order to allow the performance to be more spontaneous.)
- Have ideal basic technical models of what is required for the sport, so there is something to aim for. Although it may not always be possible to perform these technical models exactly, it is still better to have a target.
- Have alternative plans for all foreseeable situations.
- Prioritize these plans in order of the most likely occurrences.
- Mentally rehearse these alternatives.

This systematic approach ensures the plan will be ready to be used and the situation will be more familiar. It may be helpful to estimate options in terms of a percentage.

Many sporting events are course/track specific and require the athlete to be very familiar with the sporting arena. Consideration should be given to and should (if possible), include training and competition on the terrain to be encountered, taking into account race-pacing and the specific technical and physical demands of the course. Other issues could also include climate and altitude training and acclimatisation considerations. Also consider specific equipment requirements and possible modifications to design. For major competitions it would be advisable to spend a large amount of time training at the venue or similar venue – to simulate competition conditions. This could drastically reduce or erase completely any home advantage gained by the competition. When any given situation is too chaotic and unpredictable to plan for, accept this and put trust in the athlete's artistic, creative and instinctive abilities. When these situations have been experienced both in competition and training and when the outcome has been successful, mentally revise what occurred, as it is a major learning opportunity and may be of help in the future.

As well as formal skill training for a particular sport, also incorporate informal play into the training sessions. The situations and stimulus during play can often be more varied and unpredictable, often providing more of a learning experience than formal, regimented and repetitive training. It can be a great way to discover and develop new and varied techniques. It also provides a more varied and stimulating training regime.

Adjust and vary the mental pressure on the athlete to perform at any given time. Taking away the pressure to always produce high level performances can often lead to more technical experimentation and possible improvement. With constant pressure to perform during every competition and training session, the athlete will often revert to what they already know will work resulting in less of a progressive learning experience. Nothing has ever been learnt without mistakes being made along the way. Allow mistakes at times; they are part of learning and help to define, move and possibly extend new boundaries. Trust the athlete's artistic, creative and instinctive ability because these traits are real. They are some of the most valued and respected human abilities we have. Allow for individual technical differences in athletes; something needs to be different in order to win!

Assessing performance is a vital part of learning. Have a complete debrief after both training and competition. Planned situations can be judged on the basis of what actually happened during the performance and comparing it to the plan. This requires both the athlete and coach to know exactly what the plan entailed. This assessment needs to be done if the plan needs to be repeated at a later date. Anything that happens outside of the plan can often be viewed as a mistake, but during chaotic and unpredictable situations, the outcome can be assessed, by asking did the athlete make the best decisions in the particular circumstances? Also ask, was the original plan realistic and achievable?

The blending of experience, creative and instinctive abilities to produce high level performances must be the art within sport.

Jim Jayes © 10.1.16.