

DON'T MISS Fear in Sport (Part 1) Posted 5 days ago

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Being in the Zone - Sport’s Holy Grail

By James Barraclough

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Sportspeople often talk about being 'in the zone', but I'm sure many are unaware of what this actually means. The zone in question to give it its full title is the 'zone of optimal functioning' or when an athlete performs to their absolute maximum – has the perfect game. That is why it is the holy grail – it has so many variables that an athlete will be lucky to truly achieve this once or twice in their career. Anything from amount of sleep, relationship status, nutrition, training and coach input (amongst countless others) can influence performance. One such occasion when someone came pretty close to a best possible game was David Beckham against Greece in the World Cup qualifiers in 2001:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2r16FO6TfXg>

Beckham's arousal levels would have been close to their optimum. Arousal is defined as alertness or awakeness and exists on a continuum between deep sleep and panic/red mist territory.

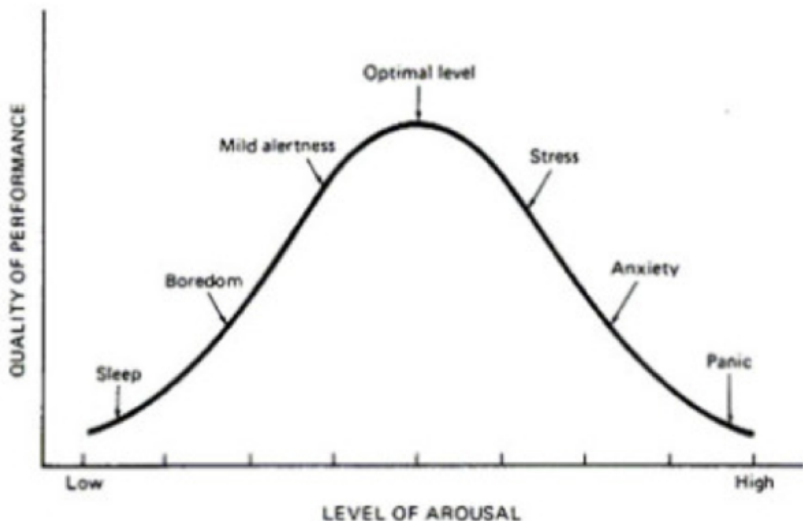
ABOUT JAMES BARRACLOUGH



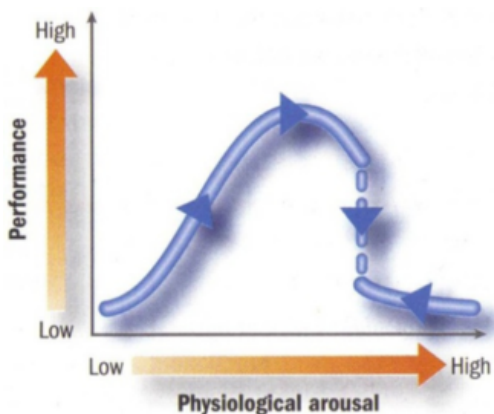
I have worked as a sport psychologist for about ten years specialising in MMA and football (soccer). I also work as a teacher in a further education college in Manchester and as a football coach at World at Your Feet Soccer Academy in Manchester, as well as many other projects locally, nationally and internationally.

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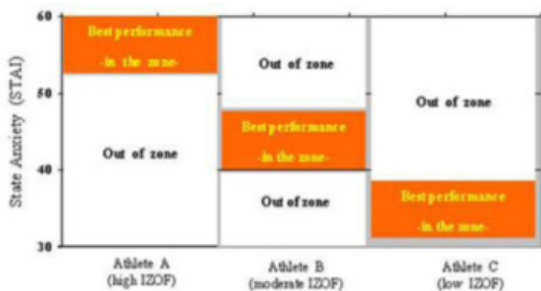
According to the above the optimal level of arousal and peak performance (the zone) occurs about half way between these two extreme human states. This is an earlier idea that has since been developed. It is now though that the catastrophe model is more likely:



This model suggests that arousal increases to an optimal level until a ‘catastrophe’ occurs – the athlete loses control through excess nerves or anger. Once this has occurred the player must re-group (relax) and rebuild their arousal levels otherwise their performance is doomed to failure such as Wayne Rooney’s sending off against Montenegro (and Portugal):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGOLCEjAuCQ>

Yet another model points out that everyone’s levels of peak performance are different:



An example from the era when I was growing up would be Matt le Tissier who appeared to operate at lower levels of arousal (Athlete C):

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YB9HjYmYwpk>

compared to Paul Gascoigne who always appeared very psyched up on the pitch (Athlete A):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyX_af6Rm3k

Therefore individual player’s methods for attaining the peak will vary, which the player, coach/manager must take into account in preparing for a game. Psychological tools that can help are imagery (mental rehearsal), effective goal-setting and the correct type of self-talk (inner voice) as well as how they deal with mistakes. The player themselves can also be made aware of where there best levels of arousal lie and attempt to manipulate them using psyching up techniques:

- Use arousing imagery of previous good performance
- Use arousing music (calm mind – aroused body)
- Positive Self-talk
- Physical contact (huddle)

or psyching down techniques:

- Breathing exercises (lowers heart rate)
- Stretching (elongates muscles and causes relaxation)
- Biofeedback (taking pulse or blood pressure and consciously trying to reduce)
- Relaxing self-talk

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