

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING THE CONCEPT OF FLOW IN SPORT

UDC: 796:159.9

(Original scientific paper)

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Abstract

Not much has been discussed about significance of the flow in sports management, the theoretical concept elaborated in mid seventies, which is now widely accepted in many areas of science, the sports management literature and sports in general. Its presence and importance in athletes development, has not been implemented enough in sports management practice, mostly in terms of sports psychology observations and in the studies of various aspects of the training process. Although the science of sports insists a lot on the concepts and phenomena related to the psychological preparation of athletes, so far the flow has been unjustly neglected. Various psychological aspects of theories that explain how to achieve success and happiness, are indicating that individuals (artists, athletes, executive managers, business people, etc..) while in rush of inspiration and energy flow, are actually generating the most of their abilities. At the same time, the state of flow provides above-average impact on the immediate environment, which is clearly consciously or unconsciously recognized by the sports audience. The development and construction of psychological factors that positively influence and support the athletes to focus to sport-defined goals can strengthen their self-confidence that is necessary in sports competition as a place of verification and evaluation of sports achievement. This paper essentially discusses the basic theoretical explication of the concept of flow and its applicability in sport management as an important element in the study of psychological phenomena that determine the final outcome of the process of transformation in sport.

Key words: *Flow, Sport, Sports Management, Transformational process*

Introduction

In its broadest conceptual context, sport can be thought as complex and multidisciplinary social area. Therefore, while considering all its segments and forms, is required to develop serious approach and use other available knowledge that comes from different scientific fields such as medicine, biology, psychology, sociology, technology, management, etc. However, despite the aspect that can be dominant while describing some sports form or phenomenon, we must put first the human movement as the key physical activity in sports which can be further more considered with other biological, psychological and social determinants.

Sports management and its modern practice, integrate and present a complex, unpredictable managing activities in a multi-dimensional system of sports, which is particularly applied in its essential part which includes all organizational and management elements in creating and maintaining the “coach-athlete” relationship. This type of relationship can be treated as a specific subsystem in the system of sports organization, and therefore, it is directly linked to management’s ability of proper analysis and usage of relevant information, detecting and solving problems and making decisions in accordance with specific sports task. In order to respond to all the challenges that come from rapid and constant environment changes, coach and athlete have to constantly develop and improve those managing skills which can secure proper analysis and selection of information so they can use only those data that are essential for effective achievement of their own goals.

Coach figure represents a specific situational manager and its obligation is to manage and control current and future psychological, mental, physical and emotional condition of an athlete. Above all, coach

needs to support and secure athlete's motivation. Factors that might influence the mood and attitude of the athletes and their relationship to training process and competition are numerous, among which the most important position holds the manner of the training organization. Therefore, training organisation is another important task for the coach and it directly influences the motivation level among athletes to achieve specific sport activities and take certain actions. Infrequently, athletes are demonstrating negative psychological changes and expressing negative emotions, emotional exhaustion, which are thought to be caused by motivational factors, and consequences of, among other things, inadequate cyclization and periodical organisation of the training (Fratrić, 2009).

While talking about sport globally, it can be seen that dominant associations are putting emphasis on the concepts such as health, happiness and good mood. Whatever the sporting area is in question (professional sport, unprofessional competitive sports, recreational, school sports, etc.) sport is described as an activity that has strong positive impact on the man's health condition. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2005), "health is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity but the state complete physical, mental and social well-being". In recent years the definition has been expanded and includes the ability of individual to lead a "socially and economically productive life". Modern science has quantitative approach and defines health as a sum of "reserve capacity" that comes from basic functional systems. Thus, it surely includes human happiness in its broadest context.

However, most people when thinking about this, consider that the possession of large amounts of material goods (money, house, car, etc.) could bring happiness and joy into their lives. Because of such widespread values, health is, unfortunately, in most cases, thought and appreciated only when damaged.

If we look back through time and other experiences we will find confirmation for the abovementioned statement and realize that material goods can not bring long term happiness to people. Money and power are useful stimulants, and both can ensure "happiness" in certain moment, but in our nature, as human and social beings, is to underestimate primarily those things we own. Despite everything the one has, there is always intention to achieve more (more money, more power, more comfort, etc.) If the individual does not learn how to modify personal needs and desires (which exist in the nervous system and can be transmitted genetically), does not learn how to "enjoy the moment" or to take the best from the time that passes by, there is a great possibility that he/she will generally be disappointed and with no illusions at the end of life. (Mitić et al, 2008).

Flow is the mental state of operation in which a person, during physical activity, is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity. This psychological concept, which was proposed and developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, has been widely accepted and valued in many areas of science (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). The essence of flow refers to the attitude that it represents the pinnacle of emotion restraint, in order to secure complete and focused motivation and success in any activity. According to the author, during the flow the emotions are not just contained and channeled, but they are becoming positive, energized, and fully aligned with assigned tasks.

Up to now, flow was not often mentioned and discussed in modern sports literature and as well it was not widely spread in training practice. Its presence and importance has not been studied enough in both, the observations of sports psychology and among the studies of possible aspects of training process. Taking into account that sports theory and practice respect all terms and phenomena that are related to psychological preparation of athletes, it can be concluded that this segment has been unjustifiably neglected. This is mostly important because, in addition to adequate motor and technical skills of athletes, psychological processes and mental condition in general, represent a key factor in achieving high sports results. So, when it comes to sports, it is nearly impossible to think about the concept of happiness and joy, without understanding the concept of sport success, and the values of the "prize" that should be reached by direct participants-athletes.

Flow – Completely Focused Motivation

The flow theory by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, has become very popular, especially on the West, in various psychological studies (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Psychological aspects of theories that explain how to achieve success and happiness, are indicating that individuals (artists, athletes, executive managers, business people, etc.) while in rush of inspiration and in state of energy flow, are actually generating the most of their abilities. Flow provides above-average impact on the immediate

environment, which is clearly, consciously or unconsciously recognized, especially by the sports audience.

The concept of the flow theory was born back in the seventies (Csikszentmihaly, 1975), when Csikszentmihaly and his fellow researches began to develop psychological studies based on the interviews with people (mostly artists), who were, in moments of their high inspiration, describing their psychological condition as extremely productive due to strong energy flow of their own creativity. It is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In this context, modern established aspect of flow represents completely focused motivation and reduction of other emotions in order to achieve success in a particular activity. While in the state of flow emotions are positive and fully converted into motivation that gives the proper support to creativity and man's ability to focus on specific goals.

Csikszentmihalyi explains that when a man is in a state of absolute commitment (*flow*), to creation or realization of his tasks, there is not enough attention to focus on other emotions or feelings, nor the possibility to think about some other problems (at home, at work, etc.). As well, primary needs, such as time, food, sleeping etc. are being completely ignored. A man's body and consciousness are being repressed due to creativity and in such mental state "being is temporarily sidelined" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006, by: Mitic et al., 2008).

Sports aspect of the flow can be represented as a special psychological and physical condition of an athlete, or a kind of creative inspiration, inner satisfaction and complete dedication and ability to concentrate to particular sports activity, when an individual is aligned with his own energy flow while fulfilling the technical sports tasks and finally achieves success. In addition to this, the flow can be interpreted as a *focused motivation*, and an absolute support to emotions while an individual is taking any activity (studying, competing, artistic creation, etc). Still, during sports activity is not enough to define and channel the emotions, but to put them in a positive alignment with goals. Due to that, it might be concluded that among first signs of athlete's flow recognition, is its passionate commitment and demonstrated joy while doing some sports activity.

Flow can be described as an sort of ecstasy. Discussed in terms of sports development, this phenomenon has been recognized even in ancient Greece, where the idea of ecstasy meant full dedication to something (subject, object, activity) and absolute commitment in some activity (art, sport achievements, rhetoric, philosophy, etc.). Today it is used to describe a mental state in which one feels released from the daily routine. Modern conception of the ecstasy can represent the experience of different (new) reality.

Transformational processes, as primary characteristics of modern sports, are determined through sports training which represents the central part of the sports system, and they often involve various motivational problems of the athletes. It is essential for the coach to learn how to motivate the athletes and if being successful, athletes will show more interest in the sports activity and training. However, if being unsuccessful, athletes will be uninterested and will not offer their maximum abilities. Therefore, the notations such as "motivation", "interest", "motive", "prize", and the like, are common in the everyday sports environment, but not often correctly implemented in their essential meaning. Secular explanations of these terms are often too simplistic, while on the other hand, technical explanations are very different, depending on the author. The reason for this, among other things, is reflected through the fact that science of psychology, just recently started to study sports motivation and since it is a very complex phenomenon of human mental life and behavior it can not easily be interpreted in theory.

While reviewing the role and importance of studying the flow in sports it is also necessary to take into account some traditional theories. Learning theory by Hull-Spence (Spiker, 1970), and its "drive reduction hypothesis", determines the relations between motivational and learning factors. This theory is important because the transformational processes in sports represent the specific systems of learning that requires continuity, particularly in aspects of sports training and sports technical education. According to Hull-Spence point of view (Rossiter & Foxall, 2008) basic theoretical formula is offered: $E = D \times H$, where **E** stands for excitatory potential-the manifestation of some learned response, **D** is for drive (motivational energy), a temporary condition, produced by provocation of anything that organism needs, and **H** is for habit intensity, learned activity or technique which is improved by the exercise. In other words, in the learning process in sports and in athlete's demonstration of full potential from adopted knowledge, there is always tendency that what has been learned can not be activated and manifested only by excitatory potential of athlete. It is necessary to include specific motivational tendencies and put

it into multiplicative relation with habits in training intensity. This means that success of the learning process equally depends on motivational component and properly developed athlete's habits (repeating), and it also represents a favorable option for future verification of an athlete's achievement in sports competition. Therefore, motivation represents a specific sum of athlete's complex characteristics that have a great impact on athlete's demonstration of learned knowledge and further development of motor skills abilities.

Flow is directly related to the intrinsic motivation of athletes. Only those motor (sports) activities and tasks that cause complete dedication of an individual, which are associated with high sports goals, may contribute to the "state" of natural flow. Such activities should be characterized by high intensity of challenges and other capabilities of the individual that should be aligned with authentic physical and mental capacity of athletes. If, for example, the activity is too easy to perform, challenge might be neglected and the athlete may experience satiation. Conversely, if the activity is too difficult, it can cause anxiety, which is a disturbing factor for athletes in attempt to give maximum. Therefore, it is necessary to enable the environment where athletes will be completely focused on goals and will manifest total commitment to the specific activity (Chart 1).

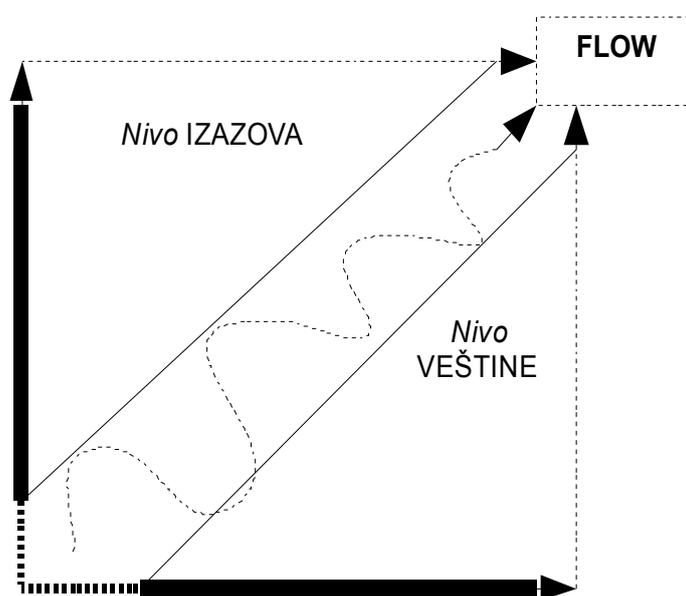


Chart No. 1 – Conditions for the flow development

When it comes to sports activities it is necessary to bear in mind that the flow does not occur in moments of relaxation and fun, but only when the individual is involved in an intensive sports activity, fulfilling the task which requires mental and physical maximum of athlete's capacity.

Besides this, essential element that activates the flow is the level of previously set goal which athlete needs to reach. Sports goals particularly are complex and they are thought to be practically inexhaustible. Therefore, relation of motivation and flow, is set on the basis of two important factors:

1) **level of challenge**, which set goal represents for the athlete and his physical and mental possibilities. This level might appear in low, medium and high intensity.

2) **level of skill**, that is necessary for efficient goal achievement, which also can be low, medium or high intensity.

The low level of challenge and low skill possibilities can cause athlete's apathy, while intermediate level of challenge and low level of skills are causing concern. As well, high level of challenge and low skill level can cause anxiety, while low level of challenges and intermediate level of skills is causing saturation or boredom. On the other hand, intermediate level of skill and high challenge level create excitement, and low challenge level and high level of skill might lead to relaxation (calmness). Finally, the intermediate level of challenge and intermediate level of skills leads to a state of control. However, only the combination of high levels of challenge and skills might secure the condition of the flow (Chart No. 2).

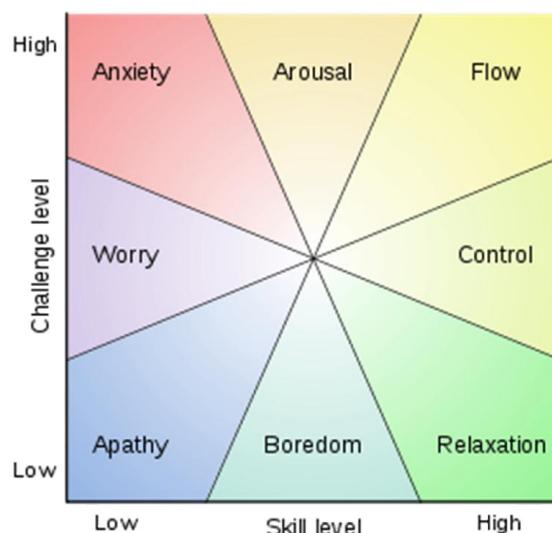


Chart No. 2, Mental state in terms of challenge level and skill level, according to Csikszentmihalyi's flow mode (Csikszentmihalyi, M., *Finding flow*, 1997)

Components of Flow in Sports Activity

According to Csikszentmihalyi's theory, eight factors can be related to accompanying the experience of flow and those are (Mitic et al, 2008:152):

- 1) Level of challenging activity,
- 2) Loss of self-consciousness,
- 3) Clear goals,
- 4) Focussed concentration,
- 5) Sense of potential control,
- 6) Time distortion,
- 7) Feedback information
- 8) Autotelic or self-rewarding experience.

Applicability of these factors can be very intense when it comes to sports activity, which is presented on Figure no. 3. Enjoying realization of sports task that might lead to certain outcome, and which contributes to a sense of *the flow*, will be possible only by the following conditions:

1) Level of challenging activity - sports task must include a specific skill, but also the balance between athlete's possibilities and the challenges of the activity. Flow can occur when an athlete finds himself in front of a great challenge which demands certain skills and ability to apply them. When it comes to this factor there must be an equilibrium between the demands of the activity and possibility of athlete to achieve it (to fully respond to those requirements).

2) Loss of self-consciousness - in situations where the challenges of the sports achievement are great, and if it requires a certain level of skills among athletes, while achieving them, athlete's attention should be focused entirely on the specific sport task. If an individual is completely focused on the activity, so that can produce spontaneous reaction as a response to the particular circumstance and requirements of the task, then a personality stops being self-consciousness and might reach *the state of flow*. This is also one of the most common characteristic of the so-called "optimal experience" or "the state of natural flow";

3) Clear goals are enabling full participation in an activity that produces a state of flow. It is essential that an athlete knows exactly what he/she wants and to put all efforts towards that desire. But still, according to the Csikszentmihalyi's model, neither extreme goal does not fully allow enjoyment of the selected activities. Therefore, it is necessary to adjust the goals to actual availability of an athlete;

4) Focussed concentration implies a high degree of concentration in a specific sport activity, or motor task. At the same time, athlete's awareness is strictly occupied with sports task and leaves no space for any other irrelevant information;

5) Sense of potential control - most of sports activities and other motor tasks are, in most cases, extremely complex and even if applied properly, can not be a guarantee to successful outcome. Therefore, a sense of control over the situation is one of the essential characteristics of every successful athlete and plays an important role in the realization of sports achievement. For athletes, it can be said that, by the nature of their best sports experiences, they still do not enjoy in the fact that they can have the control over situation, but the enjoyment lies in the process of achieving the control in difficult and challenging situations;

6) Time distortion- subjective sense of time during the state of flow is not in accordance with objectively measured time. Certain situations in sports performances can last to the athletes as an "eternity", even though, objectively, they last just a few seconds or milliseconds;

7) Feedback information – are very important in terms of direct and immediate response to specific stimulus. The success or failure are highly visible categories in sports activities, so the behavior of the athletes and all possible reactions to new situations, can be modified regularly. Almost any kind of feedback information or experience can be pleasant for the person, if it is logically connected with the goal, in which a certain psychological effort has been invested. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006).

8) Autotelic or self-rewarding experience - successful implementation of sports (motor) tasks is usually manifested as a pleasant experience, and not perceived as a difficulty. Execution of sports, in most cases, represents the pleasant activity for the athlete, so that puts this factor into the context of internal motivation (for example, where material reward is not a priority, but successfully accomplished sports task is the prize itself).



Chart No. 3, Components of flow in sports

Conclusion

Modern psychology of management in sports (Dunderović, 2004) clearly defines that a large number of psychological features that are related to success, are based on learning, particularly about motor skills and developing related habits. Consideration of these processes is strongly related to the structure of an athlete's personality and it's individual ability to achieve success in transformational process in sport.

Generally speaking, individual differences in abilities of athletes, are demonstrated the most while achieving some complex sport (motor) activity. In other words, in a variety of required motor skills, various possibilities of sports activities and techniques of individual's can come to the surface. So in this kind of relations, it might be concluded that all required skills are equal to the number and type of sports activity.

In addition to this, the abilities of athletes (Rot, 1978) can be thought and perceived as their personal features, that determine the success of sports activities and results, only if the ones that are actually performing them have a similar experience and are equally motivated to perform them. Such situations are mostly caused by environmental factors (external environment of the athlete), while the abilities are mostly determined by hereditary factors.

In the assessment of various psychological factors and their impact on the success in specific sports, dominant position is taken for motivation as a factor that determines the possibility of final success in sports. Athletes who put their sports goals clearly and objectively high, and are prepared to put maximum of their effort in order to accomplish them, will have a significant advantage over competitors (which may be relatively better prepared, either physically or tactically). Therefore, it is extremely important to continually emphasize the importance of motivation among athletes, meaning both external, and even more, internal. It is necessary to know how to guide the athletes to develop self-motivation techniques and on the other hand it is also important for the coach and other team members to know how they might contribute to motivation in most efficient way (Nešić, 2003).

Problems of psychological preparation of athletes (before, during and after the competition) are representing a complex group of problems that might seem, to all subjects that control the transformational process, more important than all other aspects of sports psychology. Developing intrinsic motivation, and related construction of the psychological factors that positively influence athletes to focus on sports-defined goals, can strengthen self-confidence, which is necessary during competition, as an activity that brings verification and evaluation of final sports achievement.

In order to make this requirements of training process possible, it is necessary to bring the athletes to state of complete focus toward particular sports activity (content, exercise, motor task, etc.). When individual develops the ability to focus, all necessary perceptions for successful execution of the sports goal are becoming more intense and lead to a sense of clarity (at that time athlete exactly knows what he/she should do). Such state of mind represents the **flow**, and even though, sometimes it seems difficult for individuals, they exactly know what to do and that it is possible to realize. Sense of time disappears, athlete forgets about himself and feels as a part of something much larger. In such a situation, it becomes clear that every action that is taken is, by itself, worth it.

It can be said that some research in Serbia (Mitić et al., 2008) quite systematically clarify some of the psychological aspects of the origin and significance of the flow. Therefore, it's applicability in sports is, more than possible and justified. As the primary goal of this paper is to draw the attention to a very interesting topic for further development of the science of sports management and sports practice, in the context of improving the quality of the training process, it is possible to withdraw certain parallels within the above mentioned research studies. Therefore, the preconditions for the occurrence of flow among athletes and in the context of their personality features, are related to the higher positioning of the following categories: adaptability, assertiveness, a certain level of emotional perception of it's own personality, ability to express and improve the emotions, the ability to maintain high quality of relations with others, high level of self-esteem, self-motivation ability, higher social competence, and greater empathy.

Problems that involve different questions of psychological preparation of athletes are very wide and varied. Especially when it comes to professional athletes (regardless of the modalities of their involvement - as a professional or non-professional athletes), it is particularly focused on continuous recording, monitoring and necessary intervention in areas that are dealing with the issues of motivation, concentration, confidence, learning process, group cohesion, communications, etc. Numerous theoretical and empirical research, as well as daily sports coaching practice, point to the great importance of continued research and monitoring of a number of psychological factors that influence the quality and performance of competitive athletes performances. Therefore, it is very clear knowledge of the importance of monitoring, control and improvement of athlete's skills and characteristics in psychological aspect. Proper psychological preparation is the segment of the training process that gives to the athletes possibility to maximize their physical, technical and tactical preparation and ensures that the athlete will demonstrate it's best skills when it is most needed. In this context the importance of the study of flow among athletes, can significantly provide a new and better dimension to the practice of professional sports experts.

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