

Maintaining Perspective: Recommendations for Elite Performers

Matt **Brown**, USA, Cal **Botterill**, Kathy **Cairns**, Canada

Dr. Matt Brown is a sport psychology consultant and counselor at the National Sport Centre - Calgary. He completed his Masters degree in sport psychology and his Ph.D. in counselling psychology, specializing with athletes. He works with athletes of all levels and has recently begun taking performance psychology principles to the fields of education and health. Matt is a former university football player and national level decathlete.

Email: mtbrown35@hotmail.com

Dr. Kathy Cairns is a professor in counselling psychology at the University of Calgary. Her research and teaching are in the areas of counselling theory, gender considerations, and qualitative research.

Email: kcairns@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Cal Botterill is a professor of sport psychology at the University of Winnipeg. He has a wealth of experience working with athletes, including many Olympic and professional performers. He is working to expand the applications of sport psychology to numerous other fields.

Email: botterill-c@s-h.uwinnipeg.ca

Abstract

In 2001, an article was published documenting the process of *perspective* (Brown, Cairns, & Botterill). A grounded theory approach was employed to capture the manner in which 11 elite Canadian athletes maintained healthy conceptions of self, healthy relationships, and healthy perceptions of the events and experiences that coloured their lives. The first article described a model of *perspective*, and illustrated it through rich qualitative data provided by the participants. This paper articulates the *recommendations for performers* that were drawn from that same study. The recommendations are divided into the three main components of the model, namely defining the self, living authentically, and experiencing fully.

In 2001, we published an article in this journal about the concept of perspective (Brown, Cairns, & Botterill, 2001). A grounded theory approach was employed to draw key insights from elite athletes who, by all accounts, were able to remain grounded in spite of the demands of the elite sport environment. The first article described the methodology, the model, and the data that

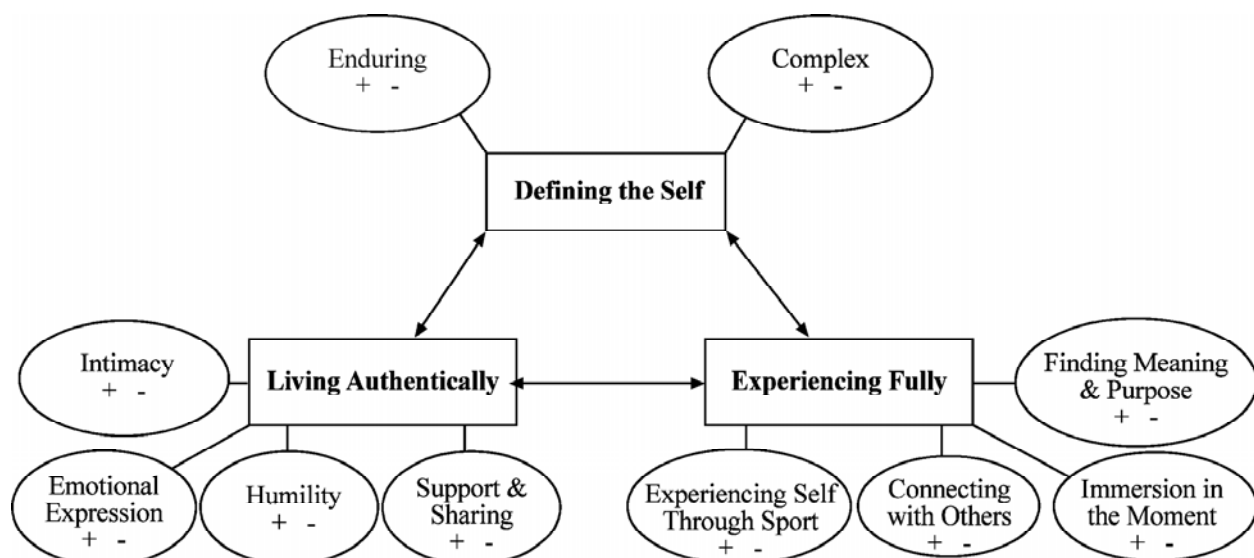
illustrated the elements of the model. Due to the depth of the data involved, the article did not touch on the recommendations that arose from the interviews. Although these insights are drawn from the experience of a few, the strength of the source and the consensus of their lessons warrant the sharing of these ideas in a larger forum. In addition, there has been growing validation of these ideas, de-

rived from documented professional contact and studies (MacDonald & Orlick, 2004; Botterill & Patrick, 2003; Orlick, 1998, 2000; Amirault & Orlick, 1999).

In short, the recommendations in this article represent an experientially-grounded guide for others to maintain perspective in their own lives. But before presenting these, let us return briefly to the concept of perspective.

The Model

Figure 1. The process of perspective



The model of perspective included three main pieces: Defining the self, Living authentically, and Experiencing fully. The relationship of these components with the challenges of the environment is perhaps best characterized in the following way:

Ideally we all want to connect meaningfully with our environments: the things we choose to do, the people we're with, and the places where we spend our time. In this connection is a vividness, a brilliance that is intensely stimulating and rewarding. And our best chance of connecting is to focus on the experience in and of itself (experiencing fully), and to have cues for returning to it when we

are distracted from it. However, there are certain environmental 'hazards' that frequently disconnect us from the purity of experience.

One of these is the illusion that success will separate us from ongoing fears of inadequacy, fears of being less worthy of love and belonging. We can easily come to believe that success will eradicate these fears, thus becoming fixated on the 'implications' of our experiences as they unfold, and subsequently contaminating the experience itself. Recognizing that success procures nothing more than a shallow and very fickle experience of acceptance and belonging can serve

a protective function. This can help us to overcome the distraction of the dirty 'promise' that success has to offer, allowing us to refocus on the experience itself AND relationships with significant figures whose acceptance is not success-dependent.

Further, while immersed in any environment, things can grow much larger than appropriate scale, thus eliciting emotional responses and appraisals that far exceed the scale of the events unfolding. This can cause us to distort and discolour our experiences in order to protect ourselves from them. It prevents us from facing our experiences and their implications head on. Herein lies yet another experiential contaminant. If one has mechanisms for stepping back from a given environment or seeing it in relation to other aspects of self or a bigger picture, then things can return to scale, reducing the tendency to distort or even repress experiences in their complete form. Further, if emotions are accepted and allowed to run their course, rather than being dammed until they overflow, this can make the affective component of experience very powerful and meaningful, rather than completely overwhelming and requiring alteration. As a whole, we would say that this state represents 'perspective'.

Essentially, there are certain conditions and ways of looking at oneself (that we've lumped under the umbrella of perspective) that serve a protective function for our ability to experience fully. At the core is a view of the self that is enduring and multi-faceted, and resistant to the pressures and allure of the athletic environment. The presence of unconditional support and means of recovery and expression can reinforce this, as can a focus on the value of experience for its own sake. Maintaining perspective is an ongoing, dynamic process as you will no doubt appreciate as you make your way

through the insights below. For an in-depth description of the perspective model, see Brown, Cairns, & Botterill (2001).

The recommendations are divided into the three sections of the model. You will notice that the recommendations are laid out prescriptively. I acknowledge that these results are based on the ideas and experiences of a small group of individuals and that I should be cautious in taking a prescriptive tone. However, the word 'recommendations' carries the implication of suggested action, rather than an imperative tone.

Recommendations for Performers

Defining the Self

- *Separate your value as a person from your success and failure as an athlete. If you start each day believing in the fundamental value in each of us then the rest of your day can be about living, not proving your worth.*
- *Think of your sport as a way of experiencing your body and your qualities, not as something that defines you. This will help you to enjoy the experience more fully. It will also allow you to make a smoother transition out of sport. It's easy to say "I'm a dancer" or "I'm a hockey player". But you have certain qualities that made that activity a good match for you. The qualities that make you up are enduring and are difficult to take away. Competitive, physical, introverted, extroverted, gentle, aggressive, artistic, inquisitive, easy-going, driven. If you pinpoint the qualities that make you up, you'll find numerous ways to connect to them, rather than being defined by an activity or affiliation.*
- *Protect times when you can be a 'non-athlete'. This will help to re-*

plenish your energy and keep you from getting too caught up in your sport-life. This way the highs and lows are less apt to become unmanageable. Some athletes may protect time with people outside their sport. Others may take a hobby with them on road trips: sketch pads, books, fishing kits, an instrument, you name it.

- *Remember that you are constantly evolving as a person and as an athlete. Pay attention to the ways that you're changing so that you can keep those changes consistent with your values and who you want to become.* The sports writers may lament an athlete 'losing their fire', but sometimes it's because it's time to move on. Your strengths as an athlete may change. Adapt. Don't fight too hard to be static.
- *Accept yourself for all the good and the bad, the weak and the strong. By seeing yourself for who and what you really are, this will make it possible to share this 'real self' with others. This will help to reduce the tension that is created when there is a discrepancy between who you are and who you're trying to convince yourself and others that you are.* You're not perfect. When the media, your friends, or your fans put you on a pedestal, climb down. Show them a vulnerable side, a human side. Share an embarrassing failure or a weaker moment. It will help people to identify with you, and alleviate the pressure to live up to 'God status'.

Living Authentically

- *Cultivate your relationships with close friends and significant others. These relationships can provide you with a different kind of fulfillment that the world of elite sport probably will not.* Make those calls, even if they have to be short. Invest time with family and friends. Go to your niece's soccer game. Go to your spouse's staff BBQ. It's a welcome break and a message that those people are important.
- *Letting your guard down and being completely open and honest with those people closest to you can be a liberating experience. You may be surprised at how understanding and accepting they can be. They can be great sounding boards, allowing you to express emotions fully and to come to terms with the events in your life.* Share your feelings or even cry if it feels right. Let them console you. Indulge yourself with a 'smaller moment'; admit when you're jealous of a teammate or a competitor; share how close you were to quitting after your injury. Let them into your world: the good, bad, and ugly of it.
- *Remember that the support, acceptance, and understanding that you receive from those around you is also valuable for each of them to receive. Try not to receive more than you give. Find ways to add value to the experiences of those around you.* This balance is critical in any relationship. The key people in your life have their own challenges, heartbreaks, performances, and triumphs. Be to them what they are to you. It will balance the scales and ease your feeling of indebtedness.

- *Embrace the rich relationships that can grow through shared experiences in sport. Beware of the influence of envy and comparisons with teammates and competitors, for these can diminish the positive relationships that might otherwise develop. You'll miss the camaraderie of sport when you leave it, perhaps more than anything else. Look around the locker or dressing or waiting room. Soak it in. It's great stuff. Look across at your competitors, pitted against you but sharing the same passion; that's a fascinating relationship in its own right.*
- *Try to avoid comparisons between your relationships in sport and those outside of it. They're different. Both contribute to a richness of your experience. Both can help you to cope at different times. Struggling together towards a common goal, through pain and injury, successes and failures, exhaustion and breakdowns strips away a lot of posturing. You really see people for who they are. And that's pretty special. But other experiences will have similar effects : A coaching role. Parenting. Death of a friend or family member. Counselling a friend in need. They'll all reveal the real issues in life and real feelings of people involved. Real emotion. It's not gone when you hang up your cleats.*
- *Share your experiences **with** those closest to you, rather than trying to attain achievements and accolades **for** them. Ask yourself this: Do you let those people console you and be there for you when things go wrong, the same way you share your successes with them? Do you still call when you lose or perform poorly or*
do you hide away in shame? They love you. Let them. Their love for you is not performance-contingent.
- *Be humble in success and keep your chin up in failure. If you believe that outcomes don't determine your worth as a person, then neither success nor failure can alter who you are. Don't crow in victory. Arrogance is isolating. Don't disappear from sight when you lose, unless it's the bit of time you need to grieve.*
- *Humility will help to keep you connected to the people around you. When you're humble, you can interact with others on a more intimate and meaningful level. Who are the real icons of sport, the ones that really leave a legacy? Gretzky, Jordan, Lemay-Doan. They all share this quality.*
- *Be gracious in success. Acknowledge the collective efforts that were necessary for you to have a chance at success. This again will help you to stay connected to the people around you and will enhance their motivation and enthusiasm for your sport. The coaches, support staff, volunteers, the equipment manager, the fans, the peewee coach, family members. They all played a role. You can give them such a thrill by sharing the credit.*
- *Your emotions can be your best window into who you are and what you value most. Pay attention to them. Accept them as your own. Find adaptive ways of expressing them. This will help you to feel less burdened and allow you to live in the moment. Cry it out, talk it out, write it out, run it out. Whatever works for*

you. But don't suppress it; it'll eat you like cancer.

- *Use your emotions to help you identify and construct the kind of lifestyle that will give you the greatest sense of passion and purpose.* How often do you hear people say "I wish I hadn't gone with my heart"? It's a rarity. When to retire, when to take a break, when to take a stand, when to turn it up a notch. All these things can be crystal clear when you listen to what you're feeling.

Experiencing Fully

- *Allow yourself to be lost in the experience of your sport. When you become focused on outcomes and their significance, always return to the focus and feeling that you wish to create when you train and compete. This will help you to create that feeling more consistently, rather than accidentally.* Performance in the 'zone' is ego-suspending. It's a 'judgment-free experience'. The moment you indulge yourself with thoughts of what victory would mean or the rewards of success, you contaminate it.
- *Take time to appreciate the breadth of experiences and relationships that your sport life has allowed you to enjoy: the people, the travel, the stories that you'll look back on and smile, laugh, and cry (sometimes all at once).* The richness of these things would take volumes to document... for each athlete has his or her own. The six-hour card-athon in Frankfurt Airport, those crazy, fanatical, wonderful Dutch fans, the post-Olympic bash that 'no one's ever allowed to mention again'. Great stuff.
- *Schedule in time away from your sport. This will help to avoid burnout and can rekindle your passion for your sport when it loses its 'luster'.* Elite athletes walk a fine line between optimal and over-training. A well-placed weekend off may be the difference between replenished and prematurely retired.
- *Be willing to ask yourself whether your sport still holds the passion and meaning that you want it to. This will help you to reconnect with the aspects of your sport that are most fulfilling, and will allow you to identify the right time to move on to something else.* Insightfully put by one respondent: "I don't think my love for my sport will ever burn out, but I anticipate a time when other things will start to burn a little brighter."
- *Accept that you will invariably face setbacks at times in your life and sport career. Allow the emotions to play out. Use these times to be introspective and learn lessons from your experiences. These times can also help you to reconnect with your priorities and the people of greatest significance to you.* If you think of your career as a painting, the darker times add complexity and bring vibrancy to the lighter strokes. They allow a complete story to be told. One that is real. One that is yours.
- *Take a moment to step away from your environment and see the events, both good and bad, in relation to a broader context. This will help you to keep setbacks in perspective and keep you humble in success.* A trip to the mountains, your childhood stomping grounds, a community rink, the ocean, the country, all great

perspective tools. One athlete went with his National teammates to a special needs school; talk about a perspective check!

- *Respect the effect that perspective can have on your performance. It can leave you unburdened and focused, even at the times of greatest pressure. If all that is at stake is the performance itself, then all you're left with is your love of the sport and your competitive fire.* Anxiety can become exhilaration. Noisy minds can quiet. Worries can lift like fog. Trust in the power of focusing on the right things, the peace of mind that comes from knowing that all you need to do is connect to yourself in your purest form.
- *Accept your successes and failures in sport for what they are. Enjoy the feeling of achievement. Allow yourself to be disappointed in defeat. But never fail to learn the lesson from each experience.* If you're one of the ones that risks pain for a chance at the thrill of victory, then you're vulnerable, but you're also **alive**. But don't make the highs and lows bigger in your head than they actually are. It's intense enough without blowing them up into something bigger than they really are.
- *Perspective is a process that we become better at as we mature. Pay attention to it. Recognize when you're losing it and why that happens. Pay attention to the process so that you can be empowered to move towards perspective more consistently.* The great athletes in this study could pinpoint the times when they lost their perspective. But they also viewed those moments as critical

teaching points in figuring this stuff out.

Debunking a Myth

Reading through the recommendations above, you may be struck with the common sense nature of the contents. These ideas are not particularly new. But where these insights come from is important to note. We would argue that there is an unwritten rule that many people in elite sport (and 'non-elite' sport for that matter) subscribe to: "Nice guys finish last". There is a notion that many of the rules that apply to ordinary life do not apply to those who are serious about success in sport.

But the participants in this study live by the principles of perspective and swear by their congruence with optimal performance. Take note that we use the term 'optimal performance', not winning. We believe it is fair to suggest that perspective can influence the people around you. People with perspective are responded to differently than those without it. They make people feel more comfortable with themselves and feel better about being involved in their sport. They inspire the people around them. Obviously some of those people around them will be in direct competition with them. So the performances on a whole will be enhanced. You may inspire someone to perform their best but you will also be inspired to be and perform your best.

This raises the bar even further. We talk about the power of positive rivalry: "If you're at your best, then I'll have to be that much better to beat you, and that makes both of us better!". In this way, perspective is about high performance, not outcomes, a distinction rarely made in popular culture. Put succinctly by Newburg, "If winning is all you care about, just make sure you al-

ways play against people that aren't as good as you" (Personal communication, 2000).

The age-old notion that winning is all that counts is challenged by some of Canada's top performers in their respective sports and disciplines. "Personal excellence in your performance domain and personal excellence in living your life is the real goal" (Orlick, Personal communication,

2004). Perspective works for anyone, not just in a kindergarten classroom. This discovery (although many have known this for years) could help shape the way we coach and teach aspiring young athletes. It's not necessary for athletes to forfeit themselves or their values in order to perform well. These pieces can compliment each other.

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