



Psychological states underlying excellent performance in professional golfers: “Letting it happen” vs. “making it happen”



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: In this study we aimed to better understand the occurrence and experience of flow in elite golf. As flow is more likely to occur during peak performances, and for elite athletes, our objectives were to: (i) identify golfers who achieved exceptional performances (e.g., winning a professional tournament), and (ii) explore if and how they experienced flow within that performance.

Design: Mixed-method multiple case study.

Method: Participants were 10 professional golfers (M age = 30; SD = 9.9). Performance data and participant observations informed semi-structured interviews which took place as soon as possible after an excellent performance (M = 4 days). Data were interpreted using within-case then cross-case thematic analysis.

Results: These golfers reported that they experienced two different psychological states during their excellent performances. These states were described as: (i) “letting it happen” which corresponded with the definition and description of flow; and (ii) “making it happen” which was more effortful and intense, involved a heightened awareness of the situation, and therefore differed to flow. Both states occurred through different processes, and “letting it happen” was a relatively gradual build-up of confidence, whereas “making it happen” was a more sudden stepping-up of concentration and effort.

Conclusion: These findings are discussed in relation to existing literature on flow and related optimal psychological states in sport. Recommendations are then made for future research into the experience and occurrence of both states reported in this study.

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1. Introduction

Positive psychology emphasises the study of optimal human functioning, with key themes including the fostering of excellence, exceptional performance, and positive subjective experiences (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Indeed, a primary goal for many sport psychology practitioners and coaches is to help athletes achieve optimal levels of performance, and to do so more consistently (Harmison, 2011). One valued subjective experience of particular interest to positive psychologists is flow: a harmonious and intrinsically rewarding state characterized by intense focus and absorption in a specific activity, to the exclusion of irrelevant thoughts and emotions, and a sense of everything coming together or clicking into place, even in challenging situations

(Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Flow has frequently been associated with a range of positive outcomes such as elevations in well-being (Haworth, 1993), self-concept (Jackson, Thomas, Marsh, & Smethurst, 2001), and peak performance (Jackson & Roberts, 1992). This intersection of peak experience and peak performance means that flow is extremely relevant, and highly sought after, in sport. Therefore, understanding the nature of flow and its occurrence has great potential for athletes, coaches, practitioners, and researchers, for example, in terms of how these states may be experienced more often. In this study we aimed to better understand the occurrence and experience of flow in elite golf by interviewing players as soon as possible after an exceptional performance (e.g., winning a professional tournament) to obtain more recent, specific, and detailed data of these optimal states.

1.1. Flow states in sport

Current understanding of flow in sport is commonly derived

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from Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) conceptualisation of the experience as nine dimensions. Three dimensions are proposed to be conditions through which the experience occurs (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), namely: *challenge-skill balance* (a balance between high perceived skills and demands in the situation); *clear goals* so that one knows exactly what to do during the performance; and *unambiguous feedback* about the progress that is being made. The other six dimensions are suggested to be characteristics which describe what the experience is like (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002): *action-awareness merging* (deep involvement leads to automaticity and spontaneity); *concentration on the task at hand* (complete focussing of attention); *loss of self-consciousness* (concern for the self disappears and the individual becomes absorbed in the activity); *sense of control* (e.g., over the performance); *time transformation* (i.e., either slowing down or speeding up); and *autotelic experience* (the experience is perceived as enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding).

However, despite over 20 years of research in sport, these experiences remain elusive, rare, and unpredictable (e.g., Chavez, 2008). Indeed, flow has been described as one of the least understood phenomena in sport (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). As a result, there have been calls for better understanding and explanation of flow in order to help athletes achieve its performance-based and psychological rewards (Swann, Keegan, Piggott & Crust, 2012).

A range of quantitative (e.g., Koehn, Morris, & Watt, 2013) and qualitative (e.g., Chavez, 2008) studies have investigated how flow occurs in sport (see Swann, Keegan, Piggott, & Crust, 2012 for a review). In particular, qualitative methods (i.e., semi-structured interviews) have been used to gain rich descriptions and insights into athletes' perceptions regarding the factors involved in flow occurrence. Ten factors have been identified as facilitating, preventing, and disrupting flow across a range of sports: focus, preparation, motivation, arousal, thoughts and emotions, confidence, environmental and situational conditions, feedback, performance, and team play and interaction (see Swann, Keegan, Piggott & Crust, 2012). In their positive form, these factors facilitate flow. However, if they are absent (e.g., preparation) or inappropriate (e.g., arousal, focus), they can prevent the experience. Further, if certain factors develop in their negative form (e.g., inappropriate focus, loss of confidence) during the experience, then flow can be disrupted. While this approach has yielded important insights into factors influencing flow, most understanding of how flow occurs in sport is based upon associations rather than explanation (Swann, Piggott, Crust, Keegan & Hemmings, 2015).

To date, these qualitative studies have mainly employed career-based interviews which seek the athlete's general understanding and awareness of flow throughout their career. While such interviews can obtain rich descriptions, this method has been criticised because it relies on memory of events which may have occurred years in the past (cf. Jackson & Kimiecik, 2008). The career-based nature of these interviews means that athletes' accounts can be subject to forgetting details (Yarrow, Campbell, & Burton, 1970) or biased recall of their experiences (e.g., the 'rose-tinted glasses' effect; Brewer, Van Raalte, Linder, & Van Raalte, 1991).

In response to the limitations of career-based interviews, researchers identified the need to develop methods that can capture more detailed, recent, and trustworthy description of participants' mental states in order to enhance the possibility of generating important information about these experiences (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The Experience Sampling Method (ESM; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987) was developed to collect 'experience-near' data of flow, that is, data collected in real-time or soon after the experience. Although the ESM has been employed

successfully in other domains (e.g., Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007), it has limited practicality in most sports – especially in competition (see Jackson & Kimiecik, 2008). Questionnaires have also been used to capture recent data on flow, such as the Flow State Scale-2 which is designed to be administered soon after a performance, and Dispositional Flow Scale-2 which measures the frequency with which athletes experience flow (Jackson & Eklund, 2004). While this approach has been used extensively, such questionnaires lack the rich, detailed data that interviews can provide – especially regarding *how* flow occurs in specific performances. Conversely, in a leisure context, Houge Mackenzie, Hodge, and Boyes (2011) obtained recent data on flow by conducting stimulated-recall interviews using footage obtained from head mounted cameras during river surfing. Although it is not possible to use head mounted cameras in many competitive sports, it is important to note that they interviewed participants on the same day as the event to maximise recall (see also Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2012). This approach is promising in terms of collecting recent data about flow experiences while maximising richness and depth through the use of event-focused interviews.

The flow-peak performance relationship suggests that athletes who achieve outstanding results in competition are more likely (although not guaranteed) to have experienced flow (Jackson & Roberts, 1992). The elite level also presents opportunities to identify exceptional performances due to well-publicised competitive events (e.g., with results available online), and highly skilled athletes are suggested to be more likely to experience flow (Jackson, 1996). Therefore, by identifying exceptional performances in elite sport, it could be possible to purposively sample athletes who are more likely to have recently experienced flow. These athletes could then be interviewed about that specific experience in order to obtain "experience-near" data of flow, and reduce/avoid the possibility of collecting data about events which may have occurred up to years in the past (as can be the case in career-based interviews). This event-focused approach would arguably aid recall (Reis & Gable, 2000), reduce the limitations of career-based interviews and generate more trustworthy data. This approach could also lead to new insights into flow, such as the chronological sequence of its occurrence – which Pentland (1999) considered to be a "key organising device" in developing an explanation (p. 712).

Furthermore, the individual, self-paced, and stop-start nature of golf (Singer, 2002) means that golfers can recall the shots they hit as well as their thoughts and emotions during the periods of time between shots. Thus, golfers are in a good position to reconstruct performances in sequence and detail compared to athletes from other activities (e.g., externally-paced or team sports). While flow in golf has previously been explored in elite (Swann, Crust, Keegan, Piggott & Hemmings, 2015; Swann, Keegan, Piggott, Crust, & Smith, 2012; Swann, Piggott, et al., 2015) and recreational players (Catley & Duda, 1997), no studies have yet employed such an event-focused approach. Therefore, in this study we aimed to purposively sample elite golfers after exceptional performances and interview them as soon as possible after the event to identify whether the players had experienced flow in that specific performance, and if so, to explore their perceptions regarding its occurrence. In turn, we sought to maximise the accuracy and detail of data on flow occurrence, address limitations of the traditional interview approach, and answer calls for refined methods for studying flow in sport (Jackson & Kimiecik, 2008).

2. Method

2.1. Design and approach

This study was grounded in a critical realist ontology (Easton,

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