

Your Mindset and the Subjective Experience of Sport

The one perspective that will enable us understanding athletes in more profound ways is “if we take a dive” on interiors. If you are interested and serious about changing certain behaviours as an athlete in your sport, this is part of the way to go but a very important and crucial one. Why did that footballer lash out in such a manner to the referee, which cost his expulsion and the team not performing? Why does that swimmer get so nervous to the point it affects his actual swimming technique and fatigue? Why does he always react so badly to bad performances? The answer for these questions cannot be found in numbers. This time it is a subjective answer; doesn't mean it is less true.

We don't see interiors. We can only think, feel, interpret but we cannot point whatever interior aspect we are referring to into an exact location in space in time. When the footballer felt angry with the referee no one went like “oh look that's where his anger is! I can see it! It's right there!”. No. The fact that you cannot see anger doesn't mean it's not happening for the footballer. Same with the swimmer, the fact you don't see his anxiety doesn't mean he didn't experience it.

Due to many factors that I will not go into in this article, society, cultures and people became too focused on exteriors as a way of relating to life. This led to an overflow of exploration of exteriors and a strong neglect of interiors in humans – by the way let me remind you, athletes are humans. Unfortunately, athletes are still seen and being dealt with almost as if they were machines. No wonder people are showing little interest (if any) in interiors and on discussing why this player had such and such behaviour, or why he is lacking confidence, or why he is not dealing with pressure well. This mentality and culture only make it easy to approach athletes' performances from a just-go-and-do-it type of attitude.

The latter tendencies led to a massive disregard for what goes on inside athletes and people couldn't realise how much of the athlete's potential was being lost by not addressing the inner problems and challenges athletes face both inside and outside sport. Just like an athlete who goes

to fitness to cross-train for his sport and take care of that area of his training, not taking care of interiors will leave you fragmented and less able to deal with all the challenges that you already have. If you are building a puzzle would you not like to have all the pieces with you so you can have the full and complete picture?

Athletes and the sport culture “taught” them to deal with these challenges with whatever tools they would have and however well “inner-equipped” they were. If they happened to be confident, had a healthy up-bringing, good self-esteem levels, a good relationship with the coach and parents, etc., they were more likely to strive. Otherwise, they became more vulnerable to reach their goals. And not just not reaching their goals but also experiencing elite sport as a daunting and extremely painful part of their lives.

Athletes who struggle to deal with the different sources of pressure would go through their careers without this issue ever being acknowledged, much less worked on. At best, coaches, parents or friends would give them encouraging words: “trust yourself (...) you can make it!”. But when you are “broken” down inside, feeling lonely, not understood, not supported, etc., having these well-intended supportive comments is kinda-like taking an ibuprofen pill to relief symptoms; it doesn’t deal with the infection. The root cause is left out. And most of the times what you see in how athletes react to pressure is just the symptoms; not the cause.

You know, athletes are human beings. We tend to forget that because we reduce all of their dimensions to performance and exteriors. This doesn’t allow space for the understanding of their interiors. And because they are humans, they (also) experience pain, disappointment, sadness, anger, joy, happiness, love, etc. All traumatic and stressful events we have experienced in our lives are some way or another dealt with by our psyche¹. And the most common way for our psyche to deal with such events is by repressing them out of our awareness – they may be too painful for us to process them.

An easy way to relate to all the painful aspects of ourselves that have been repressed by our psyche is if we see it as baggage. We put clothes on our baggage so that we can move around and travel. Sometimes

¹ With *psyche* I mean the totality of the human mind, including all that is conscious and all that is unconscious;



that baggage is quite heavy and this is physically uncomfortable to carry around. So if you want to relief the weight on your baggage what do you do? You open it up and start looking at what is there and take stuff out. Now it is lighter and you immediately feel you can move around better, faster and more efficiently. That's what can happen if you start dealing with what is happening on your interiors and how the baggage that you have accumulated is directly influencing your performance. Deal with this and "your performance will become lighter".

Well, but if it was that easy then everyone would be doing it and I wouldn't be here writing this article. A big problem with "the baggage" we carry is that we don't see the most of it because a lot of what is driving our behaviour is unconscious. We cannot see it. I'll say it again. We don't see it. We cannot see what we are not aware of. It's almost like seeing myself as an entity with very concrete boundaries – here is Nuno – but when I am triggered I'll have a lot of other Nuno's that I cannot see!

Karl Jung called these Nuno's sub-personalities or like my Zen Master says "me's that I cannot see". Imagine how much pain and suffering they are causing to you if you are not aware of them. How much energy are you unnecessarily spending by not addressing these issues more deeply? And now imagine how much turmoil they cause to the ones that surround you. Imagine how whenever you go into competition there are sub-personalities of your individual self at play that you are not aware of. How in the world do you want to deal with your anger if you are not aware of it? How do you want to deal with your fears if you are not aware of them? How do you want to deal with the pressure?

This is the type of inner work that will set athletes free and make you better prepared to deal with whatever it is you needs to deal with. That is why it is important to keep doing the training you have been doing, but to integrate with it the necessary inner work. Then. Boom! Your performance is impacted positively.

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