



Connect to Emotions in Sport – Should You?

Emotions are part of the art of sport, the art of performance. They are brought up all the time in sports conversations. They are part of athletes. They are part of you. They can help you transcend yourself... if you deeply listen and pay attention. And they also can limit your performance or completely block you. Science has studied them and we know a lot more about emotions these days. All of this has been great in terms of understanding how humans and athletes respond to different types of situations and the emotions that are triggered. However, it has created a lot of confusion and left us lacking more evolved ways that can allow us to go from understanding them to more deeply connecting with them. From interpretation to connection. From analysis to action. In brief, we understand how they work but we don't know how to work with them. We haven't learned to really listen.

When you start to practice a deeper listening of your emotions you become clearer and your mind immediately becomes more at ease. Like my Zen teacher Doshin Michael Nelson says "you finally pick up the phone!", and he laughs wisely. Confusion is lost. Clarity manifests. And you now know them like they are yours – in fact, who else's can they be? When you are angry at your coach or your parent(s) is it them who are experiencing that very anger you're feeling? Or is it you? What about fear? What is it informing you of? Shame? Anxiety? Have you ever asked these questions to yourself?

Not taking a deeper dive into emotions will prevent you from becoming "more intimate" with them. Closer. They will instead be distanced from you. Emotions are always trying to communicate something that brings deep wisdom. But we have learned to stay distanced from them. And we keep making sure we stay distanced. That's our comfort zone. So if something is part of you would you not wish and want to get to know it better? Or do you rather have parts of yourself that are "out there", without you having control over them or being able to learn from them.

These days there is so much talk about being positive and having only positive emotions: "hey, just be positive!", "think of good things", etc. I consider this approach a very dangerous one. I also see a place and

time for this approach. But when you can't discern the right times to lean into something that is painful because the only reference you have is the think-positive-and-feel-good approach, you are lost in a sea of positive emotions. You have stopped (or are on the road to not) making sense of what is going on with you emotionally at deeper levels.

Even though the term positive and negative emotions can be helpful, I prefer using destructive emotions for both. Too much anger, fear, envy, anxiety, etc., will damage you. And the same with positive emotions. Yes, too much of the so called positive emotions will intoxicate you and make you believe that life is all about feeling good. And it is not. It has moments of feeling good or amazing, moments of not feeling so well and moments of feeling destroyed. When things are not going well for you, if the main concern you have is to push those bad feelings away so you can feel good again you will be jeopardizing your ability to solve the actual problem you're faced with.

Emotions do become destructive if not dealt with in more evolved ways. When they are properly dealt with they become constructive for you. So if you spend little or no time getting to know your emotions more intimately, especially the ones that perturb you the most in your sport, and that deep inside you know are affecting how you show up to training and competition then you have a big gap in how you are preparing yourself.

[What happens when I don't pay attention to my "negative emotions"?](#)

When you're not paying attention to how you are feeling when things are not going well or when you are pushing these feelings away in order to feel good, you are sending an order to your psyche to store those bad experiences somewhere "far" so that you can move on. So "far" these emotions and feelings will become unconscious to you. And then they form subpersonalities that are completely unconscious to you; and if they are unconscious it means they will come out without you being aware of them. Freud called this the shadow. Karl Yung called it unconscious subpersonalities. And my Zen teacher calls them the "me's that I can't see!".

So when you are not paying attention – I really mean here that you are not doing any specific type of work with your emotions – you are moving more parts of yourself (i.e., more me's) into your unconscious. And now they will "play you". They will take full control over you. Why? Because



you cannot see all the *me*'s that are part of you and so they will have you take decisions and behave in certain manners that go unconscious to you. You need someone to point them out, so you can start to relate to them, become more intimate and integrate them into your psyche.

Surely you have seen athletes or even yourself describing their inappropriate behaviour with words like "that wasn't me... I don't know what happened". Who is that *me*?!! How can you say that it wasn't you?? Feels like someone showed up and took control, right? That's exactly what I mean when I say "the *me* you cannot see". If you get this mechanism you are much more ready to start paying attention to what you do not know or what you can't see and start optimizing your performance. The question is, how do you do it?

If you have a lot of emotions that you have rejected through your sports life (and it may be for some very good reasons you did so!) because they were very painful to deal with when you were young, they are exerting an influence in your state of mind and your body. Again, you haven't (yet) become aware of how these mechanisms manifest. I can tell you from experience that as long as you keep certain emotions in your unconscious they will manifest as some type of stress inside or outside your sport. Guaranteed.

By the way, so you don't get a wrong idea there is nothing wrong with rejecting emotions! It's the actual mechanism of rejection that protects us from very painful experiences and allows us to keep growing, especially at very young ages. So we all share this. We all have repressed aspects of ourselves because they were too painful and/or we didn't have enough capabilities to deal with them at the time they happened. I have repressed. You have repressed. We all have. The question is: are you doing the needed work? Are you becoming ever more curious to find parts of you that you haven't yet come to meet? I am and will have to continue doing because I still have *me*'s I cannot see! 😊

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