



# Inside the Zone

SPORTS PERFORMANCE GROUP, LLC

*"You can't control the future but you can prepare for it" – Rob Polishook*

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## More than an Athlete

### The secret to sustained peak performance

What's the secret to sustained peak performance? Let's face it ... this is the million-dollar question! Mike Trout, Usain Bolt, Alex Morgan ... all great competitors are trying to solve this great mystery.

From my experience working with athletes in all sports and all age levels has taught me there is a common thread to an athlete unleashing their authentic peak performance, In 2013, I learned it from Robyn, one of my clients. I call it "More Than an Athlete: Person First. Every time." This perspective is the essential starting point and blueprint to solving the mystery of sustained peak performance. In some ways it's a paradox, it doesn't require working harder, pushing, or even pulling. However, it does require that the athlete "let go" and "be themselves" so they are able to play from a grounded place inside their zone. From this state, they will have the capacity and resiliency to deal with challenges, obstacles, and adversity. Ultimately being able to navigate pressure situations from a clear perspective.

But, before we try to solve the mystery, let's take a step back. Imagine a time when you watched a player who got nervous, was tight or seemingly just froze during competition. You know that "Deer in the Headlights" look? We wonder ... how can this happen especially when the athlete (maybe it's even your own child) has performed the shot hundreds of times in practice? In fact, if we are honest with ourselves ... many of us have experienced that situation when we compete. We know, and even feel, that there is that "little something" that gets in the way of us reaching the next level.

What is usually holding an athlete back is NOT what's on the outside. Yes, you read that right, it's not the part that everyone can see: The athletic talents, skills and technique. These skills can always be improved upon. Isn't it safe to say hitting 100 extra forehands or taking extra at bats won't make a difference if the anxiety that the athlete is holding on the inside pervades

and makes him or her tight? In fact, it could actually be counterproductive because your developing bad habits.

The key is to look at the whole person, not just what's on the outside. We always need to look at what the athlete is experiencing from their perspective, on the inside, what's going on below the surface. The block might be confidence, a bad test result, anxiety of losing, an argument with a friend, fear of a reoccurring injury, trying to live up to others expectations or a combination of things. But whether it's a single issue or an accumulation of issues, carrying an overwhelming load on the court can impact your performance every time! Competitors are not robots, what's on the inside affects how we play on the outside. Let me repeat ... what's on the inside affects what's on the outside—it's one and the same.

As coaches, parents and even players, we must look at the entire person not just the athletic side to properly gain a complete perspective. We must try to understand what the person is experiencing and exactly what triggers these errors/mistakes. The only way to do this is to look through the lens of the athlete as a person first and an athletic performer second. From this lens, we immediately see a wider perspective, that of the whole person, more than an athlete. This newfound visibility allows us to explore the entire picture, what's happening both on the inside and on the outside.

From the person first, athlete second perspective, it's clear to see playing tight, anxious or with fear will block peak performance. In fact, this block or choke is not even the problem. Yes, that right, the block, choke or deer in the headlights look is not the problem. Rather, it's a symptom to something else that the athlete is consciously or unconsciously holding which overwhelms them. It's interesting to note, this overwhelm or otherwise known as a "freeze" response is actually an instinctual defensive reaction that is normal and employed by animals in the wild and humans for self-preservation. However, in the sports arena this isn't helpful.

When an athlete competes, they are not just an athlete, but a whole person. They are "More Than an Athlete!" Their unique story, spirit and authentic self are what makes them who they are. This is where their resilience, determination and individual style come from. This is the foundation on which the athlete should build on, NOT the characteristics of others. We all have our own DNA and way in which we are wired, that makes us unique individuals. The key is tapping into this uniqueness, not assimilating to a one-size-fits-all mentality. Greatness (or flow) at any level starts with the person, and then transcends through the performance.

So, what happens if an athlete does not understand the synergy between themselves, the person within the athlete? Usually, it's a fast track to burnout, fears and tears. Certainly, they won't be getting the most of themselves because they are pushing and pulling so hard that they neglect their innate talents. Further, if the coach does not understand the synergy, they will be unable to connect with the player. The player will not trust the coach because they know the coach doesn't care about them as a person, but only about the sport. Of course, you can see how that is counterproductive to motivating and inspiring a player/team. If the parents don't understand the synergy, they will unknowingly put heavy pressure and expectations on their kids. The kids will feel burdened and understand that the only way to connect or get their parents approval is to play and succeed more. Clearly this is an impossible uncontrollable situation for a child and leads to bad performance.

More Than an Athlete. Person First. Every time" is so important and an essential pathway to your child's long-term success both on and off the court. This idea is so intuitive, simple and a clear way to guide and strive for the best results. Look at any top pro like Trout, Bolt and Morgan, they are playing their own game, being their unique self. Bringing who they are to what they do. From this place...more happens.

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Rob Polishook, MA, CPC is the founder and director of Inside the Zone Sports Performance Group. He works with athletes and teams at all levels focusing on helping them unleash their mental edge. Rob has authored Tennis Inside the Zone and soon to release Baseball Inside the Zone. He has spoken to athletes, coaches, parents both nationally and internationally. His work was featured in a ESPN 30 for 30 documentary called Fields of Fear: the Mackey Sasser story. Stay tuned for More than an Athlete: the journey beyond the score to be released in 2019. He may be reached by phone at (973) 723-0314, e-mail [rob@insidethezone.com](mailto:rob@insidethezone.com), or visit [www.insidethezone.com](http://www.insidethezone.com).