

The Normal Mind: Path of the Competitive Athlete

By Chuck Schumacher

“He makes hitting a ball look so easy.”

“Her golf stroke seems effortless.”

Is it just natural ability or are there other forces at work that separate successful athletes from others? It depends on the level of competition. In youth sports, natural ability alone can play a huge role. But to successfully compete with, or against someone who has already achieved a more skilled version of themselves will require more than natural ability. It will require developing that natural ability to a remarkably high level so that whatever you're doing, it's automatic and without conscious thought — like “riding a bike.” This is being in “the normal mind.”

It's a process that starts with finding your talent — and then overcoming your own “resistance” for doing the work to develop it. But none of it will happen without the ability to sustain enthusiasm. Unfortunately, enthusiasm is often destroyed by the unproductive desire for instant results which only pollutes the mind with shortcuts — shortcuts which can derail our efforts regarding the continuous development of skill and which clutter the mind with useless, debilitating distractions.

When you do everything in the normal state of mind, as it is when totally unoccupied, then everything goes smoothly and easily — Yagyu Munenori.

Whether it's riding a bike, pitching for your little league team or shooting the winning free throw in an NBA championship game, success depends on the mind being free from clutter.



To achieve a normal state of mind in competition first requires the acquisition of physical skills. With the repetition of basic mechanics, training accumulates ultimately making it easier for the mind to be free of conscious thought during competition. When these movements are mastered to the point of natural reaction, the mind no longer interferes with the split-second reaction time needed to hit a speeding baseball, the incredible timing necessary to deke the goalie at the last instant, or the composure to kick the winning field goal in a packed stadium of crazed fans.

Maintaining a calm mind in the heat of the battle can be the hardest thing to achieve, however, as obstacles have a way of popping up at the most inopportune times. Even with advanced physical skills, the main obstacle to overcome is ourselves. And although we won't always succeed, we can always improve. Unfortunately, it's more common for us to leap ahead and dream about future outcomes instead of committing to the one step at a time approach to training which will actually take us there — one that will free the mind to embrace inevitable failures as a learning tool instead of allowing frustration to influence the next moment — one that will develop the sub-conscious mind to eventually guide us to perform effectively while simultaneously eliminating distractions.

When failures of the past or anxiety about the future are ever-present in the mind, athletic posture will be affected, and timing will be off — the body follows the mind.

There are many distractions on the slow journey toward skill development. These days in youth sports, a common pitfall is the notion of wanting our child to be on a travel team because “we don't want them to fall behind the rest of these kids”. There is nothing wrong with playing travel ball, but it should be looked at as part of the process, not an end-all — an opportunity to compete with others like ourselves who are willing to commit personal effort toward self-improvement. Otherwise, it's just an exercise in futility — a pipedream. It becomes a process of skipping steps which only subjects our mind to a state of panic and confusion as skills fail to develop and time slips by.

Achieving success in sports is not just physical — its mental. It's the development of strong character as you take the necessary steps in the pursuit of a mind/body connection which will allow the awakening of your normal mind in competition — and life.