

The Higher Calling of Sport: The Imperative for Revisioning Sport Psychology, Competition, and Why We Engage in Physical Activity

Presented at the
Fifth International Scientific Conference of
Training Sciences and Sport Physiology
University of Basrah. Basrah, Iraq. 09 March 2014

by **Joel Kirsch**, Ph.D., President, American Sports Institute
Copyright © 2014 by Joel Kirsch. All Rights Reserved.

As we travel life's journey, if we pay attention to life and take time to reflect on our experiences, we hopefully learn some of its profound lessons. In spite of myself, I have, at times, learned a few of these important lessons. For what it's worth, here is one of them: There are at least three *always*. Tomorrow always comes. Nature always finds a way. And evolution always makes the rules.

I've learned these lessons not at dramatic moments in my life, but from simple, everyday experiences and observations. I've learned that no matter how desperately I try to rationalize putting off doing something I'd rather not, tomorrow will, indeed, come and I'll have to deal with my procrastination no matter what. I've also marveled at the fact that no matter how much cement human beings can lay down to pave over Mother Earth, there eventually will be cracks in that hard, dull surface, and a weed, possibly some grass, or even a delicate flower will bloom in that tiny space. And third, if we, as human beings, fully embrace what evolution has genetically encoded in us, we will, indeed thrive as a species. Equally profound, if we do not follow evolution's rules, we will be the creators of our own tragic demise.

So, what do these three *always* have to do with the higher calling of sport? They offer us insights into why and how we need to revision sport psychology,

competition, and why we engage in physical activity. Let's take these one at a time.

When I first began studying sport psychology, I was a sponge with wide eyes. I wanted to absorb anything and everything I could. I would read books and research papers, listen to experts, trying to remember everything I read and heard. I wanted to know everything.

But a funny thing happened along the way. I started losing interest. Not because I loved sport any less, but because the way sport psychology was being approached and presented in all the books, papers, and lectures left me with a feeling that something was missing. My enthusiasm was being drained. My excitement was taken from me by the tedium of how sport psychology was being presented. I wasn't sure what that something was that was missing, but I knew it rang true for me.

So, I stopped reading, researching, and listening. I decided not to follow the course of others, but to find my own way, my own path. I applied for and was accepted into a unique doctoral program where you study under the mentorship of an accomplished and highly respected, prominent figure in your field of study. My mentor was a man in the San Francisco area by the name of George Leonard, a renowned social theorist and prolific writer whose work revolved around social theory, education, and sport.

George was an imposing, gray-haired figure, standing six feet, four inches tall, weighing a slim 175 pounds, and holder of a fifth degree black belt in the Japanese martial art of aikido.

Under George's tutelage, in addition to doing a great deal of research, reading, and writing, course work in my doctoral program included aerobic running and studying aikido. George's philosophical foundation informed my learning—human beings are whole entities, and that body, mind, and spirit are not separate elements to be examined, researched, and analyzed in isolated contexts, but are integrated and inextricably linked. I didn't know why this perspective appealed to me, but it did. I followed it because instinctively this just felt right.

I studied aikido for five years, and it was during that time that my work in sport psychology was born and has defined my work to this day. What happened was that my doctoral program expanded beyond my work with George to my entire world. I started to hear in my aikido classes fundamental principles that were also appearing in quotes from athletes in the sports section of the daily newspaper. The same principles from philosophy, science, literature, the social sciences, the arts, and aikido were what the athletes were describing in the newspaper. Only the seemingly uneducated athletes were not referencing great figures from history and research, but their own experiences in their respective sports. The athletes' sports and their play in them were their teachers, their mentors. The body and the mind were working together, with physical activity providing the insights. This was exciting.

It was at this time that I realized sport psychology was an oxymoronic term. Psychology is derived from two terms: *psyche*, meaning *the mind*, and *ology*, meaning *the study of*. So sport psychology means the study of the mind in sport. However, as I learned in my doctoral program from George Leonard, and from the statements of the athletes in the newspaper, the body and mind cannot be separated out. In sport, to study the body, is to study the mind, and to study the mind, is to study the body. Again, they are inextricably linked.

The ancient Greeks held this perspective in the concept of *arete*, which means virtue and excellence in an integrated and balanced physical, mental, spiritual way. Great figures from throughout history have also known this. The American writer Henry David Thoreau once wrote, "It seems when my legs begin walking, my mind begins working . . . any writing I do sitting down is wooden." In a similar context, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said, "I have walked myself into my best thoughts." And it was the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran who once wrote, "It is slavery to live in the mind unless it has become part of the body."

More recently, over the past 40 years, numerous studies have shown that those students who are physically active perform better academically than their more sedentary counterparts, and that older people who are physically active are overwhelmingly less likely to develop dementia than those who are less active. In fact, current and emerging research from neuroscience, medicine, and evolutionary

theory are validating all this and explaining in detail what the ancient Greeks and great figures throughout history have known.

The truth is that the body and mind are one. You cannot separate them out, as the term sport psychology does. And so, to the outside world, I refer to myself as a sports psychologist. But when I work with athletes, I explain that I am a *sport educator*, one who works with the whole person, educating the entire person in the context of arete. To not do this is to deny our very nature.

The professional, Olympic, university, and secondary-school athletes I have worked with do not simply learn techniques to perform at a higher level. They also read books, engage in discussions, and conduct research that irrefutably demonstrates for them how the body and mind are inextricably linked. They learn that to perform at a higher level in sport and appropriately respond to sport's higher calling, one must first go to a higher level as a total, unified, integrated body/mind/spirit human being.

One example of this is the practice of meditation, which is a practice in concentration. All of the athletes I work with must practice their concentration for 40 minutes at a time, first thing in the morning, at least five days a week. And the athletes must do a specific meditation or concentration practice, one in which they focus their mind on a point an inch or two below the navel in the middle of the abdominal cavity called the *center*. The center is the point at which the body is perfectly balanced, the point at which physical relaxation and power are generated, the point at which we become whole human beings.

The daily, 40-minute practice involves focusing the mind on one's center until concentration is lost, and then going back to that focus no matter how many times focus is diverted during the 40 minutes. While doing this, the person breathes in through the nose and out through the mouth. Further, the breathing is done from the center or diaphragm area, not the upper chest. This form of deep breathing is also practiced by singers, musicians who play wind instruments, and women during childbirth.

This process of concentrating, losing concentration, and returning to it happens many, many times during the 40 minutes. But, as one practices continuously, after

a while, the person is able to stay focused on his or her center for longer and longer periods of time. This is an ongoing practice, one that hopefully lasts a lifetime. I've been doing this meditation, this concentration practice, five days a week for the past 30+ years (yes, there are weeks when I don't do all five days and instances when I don't do all 40 minutes).

One of the most important disciplines I learned studying with George Leonard was the profound significance of understanding the derivation of words found in dictionaries. George never said I had to do this. He never taught it to me; it was not a lesson to be learned. Just seeing how he did it when we had discussions taught me its importance.

For example, the word *concentrate* is derived from the Latin term *com-*, meaning *with or together*, and the Latin term *centrum*, meaning *center*. So concentration literally means *with center*. In this case, the mind with the body's center, working together as one.

This form of concentration was used by Sadaharu Oh, the legendary Japanese baseball player. Oh is to Japan what Babe Ruth is to America.

In Chapter Seven of his autobiography, Oh says, "Concentration, like everything else in aikido, is both a spiritual and a physical term. Its goal is the unity or harmony of all forces that are employed. Mind, body technique are one in aikido. This oneness is the expression of nature. . . . The center in your lower abdomen prepares you for any contingency, just as if you were a warrior awaiting the moves of a deadly opponent. . . . This is what concentration can bring, why it is so crucial. So you must locate it properly, in the one point, and be conscious of it at all times, even when you're walking down the street or sitting at a meal. Once your concentration is this focused, you automatically begin to see things better. In a state of proper concentration, one is ready for anything that comes along."

The athletes I have worked with do their daily, 40-minute concentration practice, and apply this form of concentration when actually performing their sport. They also practice it in everything they do, even when walking down the street or sitting at a meal.

In this whole-person context, this is truly a higher calling of sport, a way to make us not only better athletes, but a better, more fulfilled people. As Oh puts it in his autobiography, "Records come and go. So does celebrity. Because my profession took place in the public eye, people have attached more importance to my comings and goings than they might have otherwise. I have been asked all kinds of questions in my career—questions about war and peace, art, politics, religion—and I've always had this odd feeling of being both flattered and embarrassed. The opinions of someone who has spent his life chasing a little white ball around a field really ought not be offered as oracles from the Buddha. I was a home-run hitter (as I later became an assistant manager). But I found in the world of baseball something I might never have found if I had done something else. It was surprising and unexpected. Baseball was for me, too, a form of spirit-discipline, a way to make myself a better person—although I surely never sought discipline for such a reason. It became my Way, as the tea ceremony or flower arranging or the making of poems were the Ways of others."

And what of competition? What of its higher calling in sport? How must this be revised?

Once again, we turn to the derivation of words to understand competition's true meaning, its true significance.

The term *competition* stems from the root word *compete*. And the word *compete* is derived from the Latin term *competere*. However, *competere* does not mean to dominate someone or something else. To the contrary, *competere* is literally defined as, "to seek together, to come together, agree, be suitable."

In actuality, the type of competition so prevalent in America and around the world today speaks to the lowest common denominator in human beings. It is ugly, brutal, demeaning, carnal, and debilitating. In this context, the perspective is to dominate the opponent, and even force him or her into submission. This form of competition is simply for egotistical ends, and invites cheating, the consumption of illegal, performance-enhancing drugs, illegal financial rewards, and those unsavory outsiders who choose to prosper by engaging in these activities, with little regard for arete, for excellence in the context of virtue.

But, as we have seen, the true spirit of competition is not in the context of confrontation and domination, but in the context of seeking together, coming together, being agreeable and suitable *with*—not against—our worthy opponent. Why is this so?

As we see here, the purpose of competition is to bring us together with others who will push us beyond our perceived limitations. This form of seeking *together* and being agreeable has to do with human competition's real arch enemy—*homeostasis*.

Human beings have both a competitive and a homeostatic nature. Is it not transforming when two great athletes or teams engage in a close contest that goes back and forth, with each player or team consistently performing at an incredibly high level? This level of play captivates everyone, even those who are not so keen on sport.

At the same time, who hasn't had the experience of awaking on a cold, rainy morning and wanting to just roll over in our nice, warm bed and go back to sleep? And, who hasn't had the experience of wanting to procrastinate and not do their physical workout because they just don't feel like it? Remember, tomorrow always comes.

Today, there are many who say that competition is evil and that cooperation is good. In competition's current context, this is justified. Here, competition and cooperation are seen as opposites. But in the higher calling of competitive sport, where two worthy opponents come together to push one another beyond their perceived limitations, we find that the opposite of competition is not cooperation. Rather, the opposite of competition is *homeostasis*. And, as human beings, because we are genetically programmed to evolve, anything that stands opposed to our nature, to evolving, or transcending, is something that defies our humanity. Again, nature always finds a way and evolution always makes the rules.

The true athlete knows this instinctively. Do we not see this when two great athletes or teams complete a contest and, exhausted from pushing their limits, collapse into the embrace of one another's arms in the expression of heartfelt gratitude for providing them with a transforming experience? Do we not see this on

the football field where one player will pick up the other he has inadvertently knocked down? The athletes know. We all know.

This was never more true than in the 1995 rugby World Cup in South Africa when President Nelson Mandela, imprisoned by the previous apartheid government for 27 years, called upon the black majority of his nation to embrace the overwhelming white national team, which had only one black player, in its quest for the World Cup that was held in their nation. Mandela asked the blacks to let go of their hate and bitterness stemming from the previous apartheid ruling government, and help unite South Africa for the future of the nation and its children.

Against great odds, the South African team prevailed, winning the World Cup final against New Zealand, in the true spirit of competition and sport's higher calling. Here, competitive sport was transforming, for, as Mandela said after the win: "Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers."

Had the rugby World Cup been easy for the South African team, the moment would have been lost on everyone. But because of how the South African people struggled for their legitimate, basic humanity for over half a century, and the overwhelming odds against the rugby team winning the World Cup, the situation was destined for an event that transformed South Africa and its people.

And so, it is this spirit of competitive sport, a form of sport that speaks to our true nature, a nature that always finds a way, that defines sport's higher calling.

Finally, and maybe most important of all, is the issue of sport's higher calling and why we need to revision the reasons for engaging in physical activity.

Most people believe that human beings engage in physical activity for fun, leisure activity, and health reasons. While this is certainly true, these are actually not reasons why we engage in physical activity, but outcomes of why we engage in it. Let's take a deeper look.

Over millions of years of evolution, human beings have been genetically programmed to engage in sustained, high levels of physical activity. When we do, we thrive as a people, as a species. When we don't, we develop what we call disease, de-spair, and dys-function. So why is this so?

The answers to this question actually come from neuroscience, medicine, and evolutionary theory. If you recall, I mentioned this briefly earlier.

Through current and emerging research in neuroscience, we are learning how physical activity significantly impacts the brain, and as a result, human evolution itself. How so?

Every time a muscle contracts and then relaxes, it sends a protein into the blood system that, when it reaches the brain, releases a neurochemical called *brain derived neurotrophic factor* or BDNF. These BDNFs then act as a natural fertilizer in the brain that does two things: it strengthens the brain cells we currently have and, contrary to previous thought, grows new brain cells, even for those in their later years.

In particular, two areas of the brain that are significantly impacted by these BDNFs are the nucleus basalis, located in the lower portion of the brain's frontal lobe, and the hippocampus, which resides in the temporal lobe of the midbrain area. The nucleus basalis is responsible for focus and memory, and the hippocampus for learning and memory.

Thus, the more physically active a person is, the more BDNFs are generated, and the better the person focuses, learns, and remembers. And the opposite is also true; the less physically active a person becomes, the fewer BDNFs are produced, which leads to a deterioration of the brain's ability to function.

This may even be true for women who are pregnant and their unborn child. Preliminary studies are indicating that the more physically active pregnant women are, in particular being engaged in aerobic activities, the more developed the brain of the child when it is born.

Also, as was mentioned earlier, students who are physically active perform better academically than their more sedentary counterparts, and that older people who are physically active are overwhelmingly less likely to develop dementia than those who are less active.

Further, we've learned from numerous studies that those who are physically active are much less likely to suffer from depression. And for those who do, engaging in regular, aerobic activity is as good a remedy for depression as the best prescriptive medicine, but without the side effects and costs.

Other research has proven that those who suffer from heart disease are positively impacted by physical activity equal to and, at times, even better than, medicines they might take. And for women recovering from breast cancer, the side effects of their medicines are significantly reduced by physical activity, speeding the recovery process.

The other interesting factor here is that evolutionary studies have shown that the one thing that separated *Homo sapiens*—our species—from the other four or five groups of hominids millions of years ago is that, along with the Neanderthals who eventually died out, our brains continued to grow in size while those of the other groups did not. It is this growth in brain size that has enabled us to adapt to changing conditions and be the only surviving hominid species. Here, we see a connection between evolution and increasing brain growth, something that occurs naturally through the relationship between physical activity and the BDNFs that are released in the brain.

And then there are telomeres, the caps at the end of our chromosomes. When our telomeres are long and strong, they protect the chromosomes from degradation that would otherwise lead to cellular aging and chronic diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. When our telomeres are short and frayed, degradation occurs, causing irregular cell development and division. Hence, the chronic diseases. And it is physical activity that is one of the best, if not the best, way to keep our telomeres long and strong.

So, as we have seen here, human beings engage in physical activity not just for fun, leisure activity, and health, but also to make our brains work better and

longer, and to ensure that our DNA and genetic coding remain strong and vital. And all of this is what keeps us moving along our evolutionary journey. As Professor Philip Holmes, a neuroscientist at the University of Georgia, says, "It occurs to us that exercise is the more normal or natural condition, and that being sedentary is really the abnormal situation."

Yes, we need to revision sport psychology, competition, and why we engage in physical activity because our evolutionary future is literally at stake. We need to view human beings as whole entities, with the body and mind working together, and approach optimal performance from an educational, holistic perspective, not just through a limited sport psychology perspective. We need to view competition in the context of furthering growth and development, and pushing ourselves beyond homeostasis through cooperation *with*—not against—our worthy opponents who help us do this. And we need to revision physical activity and understand that this isn't just about having fun, playing games, and being winners and stroking our egos. In reality, physical activity is about humanity's evolutionary destiny.

Yes, the workings, the knowledge, the mysteries of life, of the universe itself, are manifested through sport's higher calling. At the American Sports Institute, we believe that in the grander scheme of things, when approached in an appropriate way, sport provides a way to realize our full potential as individuals, to deal constructively with social and international concerns, to expedite the evolutionary process of our species, and, as children of the cosmos, for the universe to experience and be conscious of itself through us.

Yes, we must examine sport psychology, competition, and why we engage in physical activity, and call for a revisioning of them. A revisioning that will define our future because tomorrow always comes; a revisioning that speaks to the very nature of who and what we are as human beings because nature always finds a way; a revisioning that calls upon our genetically-programmed destiny because evolution always makes the rules.