

"the zone" of free  
play



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

" For the skilled improviser, however, time slows down (rather like in The Matrix) said, Julie Sheldon Huffaker, Brad Robertson, Gary Hirsch and Rob Poynton. " They see a palette of possibilities in front of them and make instant connections, using what they have. " This statement is so true when considering everything Nachmanovitch is saying in Free Play. He says that " inspiration of any kind, arises within us" and we are lead to find the truth in this through our experiences.

Baseball Hall-of-Famer Tim McCarver said, " The mind's a great thing as long as you don't have to use it. This is the concentration athletes all seek, one that is anchored in technique, rooted in the body, focused on the task at hand, where the conscious mind shuts off, deliberate intent is transcended, and the real self seems to fall away. Theses conditions are ripe for " the zone. " I believe that the zone is the perfect example of how athletes use things along a spiritual path to explain their success and attempt to repeat them time and time again. From the very beginning we are lead on a journey to find the art within ourselves and how to achieve greatness with it.

Finished artworks are a trace of the passage that we have made through improvisation. Michelangelo said that every sculpture he made was within the stone, that he was not the one being creative, but God was, and he was merely chiseling it away. I have a friend who I think came across the same lines in her athletic career. No doubt there are differences between arts and athletics, but the ideas are the same.

Nachmanovitch said that there were " certain principles that apply to a particular field, and others that apply across the board. I believe that this is

true across the disciplines of the arts and sports. Living the improvised life requires the ability to fall down and get back up again, which my superstar friend seemed to have mastered. Sara, as we will call her, had a way about competition like no one else. She was absolutely fascinating to watch because you could see the success that she was making right in front of you. Sara found a way to channel an idea that we are ingrained with as children; the idea that "creativity is totally natural".

She didn't look at her forte as work; she looked at it as art. She was truly skilled and truly talented. It was with this talent that she mastered the technique of the sport and found a way to express the beauty of it through her successes. "You feel clarity, power, freedom, as something unforeseeable jumps out of you." This quote sincerely describes her. She used to tell me after races that she felt completely out of her body and mind; that she could barely remember anything about the race itself, just that she was in the water doing what she knew how to do.

As spectators, we are drawn irresistibly by the thrill of witnessing the drama of self-surpassing play. Athletics awaken and invite us to our own exceptional possibilities. We recognize our own surpassing self in the actions of another. I absolutely experienced this through my training with Sara. She seems to emanate an attitude that was genuinely contagious. I felt like I was a success merely by watching her.

There is a multi-million dollar market these days for products that athletes buy to "stay in the zone." They spend money on products that promise to give them a single digit golf handicap or to beat athletes they should be

beating. For the most part I agree with this. The doctors and psychologists have truly fallen upon something that they can profit from. However, it is too simple for people to believe that they should pay someone else to teach them how to do it. Nachmanovitch says that "spontaneous creation comes from our deepest being is immaculately and originally ourselves." This couldn't be more right.

What he is saying is that, despite talent, or training, or creativity, as long as we are able to overcome the obstacles we are faced with, we will be truly creative and successful no matter what the grounds are. Here we come across what Nachmanovitch calls the "muses". The muses are anything that relieves the pressure from creativity and criticism. As children we are surrounded by muses, we are forced to be creative; everything we do is wonderful; everyday we live is better than the last. As adults, however we are thrown into a whirlwind of prerequisites and mistakes, and forced to overcome risks and tensions.

Sara and I both were faced with these obstacles, as most athletes are, but it seems that Sara had better ways of dealing with them and overcoming them. I was scared, I was troubled by being knocked down, and I watched Sara rise to the occasion every time. She was truly an athlete. She was truly "in the zone". She paved her way through high school and college by relying on that "zone" to succeed. The zone is the essence of the athletic experience, and those moments of going beyond yourself are the underlying allure of sport.

The truly greatest players seem to get into the zone frequently. During the first game of the 1992 NBA finals, the Bulls faced Portland. Michael Jordan,

had just sunk his sixth consecutive three-pointer, and in that moment it appeared as though even he was overwhelmed by the immensity of his gift. And that was the giveaway. He had become self-conscious, and so he had lost that edge, that intensity of concentration in which limitations are forgotten and the spirit is set free to soar.

The Zone; All athletes know it, strive for it, prize its attainment. It is that realm of play in which everything from skill, training and mental discipline comes together, and players feel themselves lifted to a level of peak performance in which limits seem to fall away. Most anyone who has worked hard in some field of play can recall a moment of astonishment, when all of it, body, mind and the skill that runs through both of those things came together and the boundaries of possibility seemed to open wide before one's eyes.

In these moments of pure and effortless insight, everything you do seems to turn to gold. The difference today between good athletes and great athletes is just that. Those who can define these moments are good, they succeed, but they will never truly reach a point of pure extraordinary triumph. Knowledge of the creative process involving the zone, does not substitute for creativity, but it saves us from quitting when the stakes seem too high and our vision seems blocked.

If we can overcome our obstacles and make them our trophies, we can bring our true wants to realization. " Such perseverance can be a real test, but there are ways through, there are guideposts. And the struggle, which is guaranteed to take a lifetime, is worth it. " I'm sure that Sara would agree as

most successful athletes probably would. Success in the sports world is sometimes looked at as though it is a spiritual process. The journey that it takes us on is one of the deepest self compositions and the way to find that which is fully and originally ourselves.