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Has sport lost its soul? pg 1-3

Have you lost your mind? pg 3-5

“Sport today has lost much of its real soul,  
and has become little more than just another business enterprise . . . “

article below written by Jeffrey Hodges of Sportsmind

On thinking . . .

If you had a chance to listen to, and really hear, the news conference given by Ian Thorpe announcing his retirement, you would have picked up some really valuable insights into just how important *thinking* is to all sportspeople - and not just champions.

Ian walked us through his thinking behind his decision, and it was interesting to note his mention of how he was "questioning himself" a lot prior to his ultimate decision.

This is important, because if you question anything enough, you will begin to doubt. Self doubt, lack of direction, unmotivation, loss of confidence, and so on, are often the result of continuous questioning, or of asking the *wrong kinds* of questions.

Questions such as : *Why* am I doing this? What's *wrong* with me? Why does this *always* happen to me? Why *can't* I ..... [whatever]. What I call *why(n)ing thinking*.

This is not to say that Ian made an incorrect decision, or that after ten years of extraordinary achievement in his sport, he doesn't deserve the right to move on and do other things in his life.

I simply wonder if he had enough psychological support over the past six to twelve months, to aid him in the process - because it's very easy to allow the 'why' questioning process to become self-sustaining - and ultimately destructive of an athlete's direction and motivation.

I think we've all been there at some time in our life - questioning "Why am I in this sport / job / role / relationship / whatever?"

Those who moved on obviously didn't find a satisfactory answer; while those who stayed found a way to answer the questions - and then got on with it.

If you keep asking 'why' questions of yourself, over and over again, the only result is going to be self doubt, and ultimately, giving up.

For this reason, I recommend to the athletes I work with, that they take some time to *find really powerful answers* to questions such as : "Why am I playing this sport?".

Answers that are personally meaningful for the athlete, *and which they can have ready in their mind whenever those little doubts or questions surface* - either from themselves, or from others.

It's important to recognise that every athlete will ask, or be asked, these 'why' questions at some point in their sporting careers, (and probably many times), and if they don't already have really strong, convincing answers, then the process will continue to build and feed on itself ..... until they decide to do something else.

Elite, competitive sport today is a tough business,

and only those individuals who are really clear on why they are there - and fully satisfied with those answers - will have the mental and emotional energy to handle the challenges and setbacks they will inevitably face.

Having heartfelt, powerful reasons for *why* you're playing / competing in your sport provides the motivational fuel that will sustain you through the hours of arduous training; the constant, fickle media scrutiny; the niggling injuries; and all the other challenges on your way to success.

The bygone aspiration of many of our sporting champions in the past -"to represent Australia", is no longer enough any more - and really, why should it be? When athletes see betting agencies, sports promoters and managers making millions from the efforts of athletes, why should they be satisfied with idealism?

Sport today has lost much of its soul,

and has become little more than just another business enterprise .... an amusement for the middle class, and a way of controlling the masses by providing them with regular 'circuses' to keep them from questioning or challenging the status quo of wealth and power inequality in society.

So take some time today to think about it .... WHY are you playing your sport - or doing what you're doing in your life right now?

Find at least *six really meaningful and heartfelt reasons*, acknowledge them to yourself, and then get on with it!

For athletes to succeed consistently over a long period of time, these reasons must include *a love of the actual playing of your sport* - including the training. It's also helpful to see competition in a very personal way ..... to compete for yourself first; to test yourself and hone your skills and your spirit, rather than for the rewards or glory.

Once you've found these personally meaningful reasons, trust, and tell yourself that you HAVE made the right decisions - and commit to them. Of course, you may want to re-evaluate your life from time to time, (at the end the year, or at the end of the season for example), but *excessive questioning is counter-productive*.

## Have you lost your mind?

### The structure of thoughts

Having explained just how important questions are, it's useful to recognise that questions are just one aspect of the thinking processes which affect sports performance.

Think about thinking for a moment. What is thinking? What happens in your mind when you think - what actual *processes* happen?

Thinking comprises two processes: visualisation and verbalisation (or other internal auditory stimuli), and usually both simultaneously. We think *visually*, by imagining, or picturing, or dreaming - *seeing* things in our mind's eye. We also think *auditorily* by talking to ourselves, or by hearing music or other sounds in our head.

It's interesting to realise and appreciate that *all of our performances and behaviours are directed by these two simple processes!*

All that you have done and become - and will yet be - is a consequence of how you manipulate your thinking processes. Further, in relation to the auditory aspect of thinking, it can be divided into self talk and other sounds. The self talk component includes the *questions*, which I have already discussed, and *statements*.

'Statements' are verbalisations of what you believe about your sport, the world, and life in general - and often relate to yourself. For example : "*I'm not a morning person*"; "*It's hard to get to the top*"; "*I've got a strong forehand*"; "*Women are fickle*"; "*Men are bastards*"; "*No pain, no gain*"; "*I'm not a lucky person*"; "*People are cruel*"; "*I'm a good cook*"; etc.

These statements are often very subtle and the individual is barely conscious of them. The trouble is, that these internal verbalisations -especially the ones that relate to you - influence your performance and behaviour. What you say about and of yourself, becomes true for you.

So, an important key to mental training for sportspeople is to assert some control over all these thinking processes - to take charge of the imagery, questions and statements that happen in their mind.

**Recognise that you are the master of your mind. Your mind is your servant - not the other way around!**

All mental discipline begins with the simple acknowledgement that *you are not your mind!* With this simple understanding, you can reassert your authority over the mind.

Too many people allow their mind to direct them, instead of them directing their mind!

A good example of this happened recently with a golf professional who came to me for some assistance with his mental game. He said he found his concentration wandering regularly, and often imagining negative things - which of course then happened.

I gave him a simple remedy : YOU ARE NOT YOUR MIND. I instructed him to write out the following phrase and say it often to himself throughout the day :

***I am the master of my mind. I see myself playing well, now.***

The solution to negative thinking is to not allow them to arise in the first place! Have your mind so full of positive images, statements and encouraging questions that there is no room for negative thoughts to germinate and take hold.

#### Thoughts and decisions

Another way to think about thinking is to suggest that thoughts are essentially decisions you're making. Each moment, you make decisions about what to focus your attention upon, and once you focus your attention, you then make a decision about what a particular thing or event *means* to you.

For every event in your life, in order to understand and respond to it, you *have to give a meaning to it*. The important thing to realise is that these meanings are arbitrary - the meanings you give to events *become the meanings of these events for you*.

There is nothing that is inherently 'good' or 'bad' - it all depends on what you choose to make of it. A wonderful example of this was given by Denis Waitley in his *New Dynamics of Winning* audio tape, in which he tells the story of running late for an airline flight.

He had arrived at the departure gate just as they closed the doors to the flight. Despite his angry demands and pleas to the staff to let him on, they refused. Angrily he made his way to the office to make a complaint to the management, and while he is waiting to do so, the news comes that the plane crashed on take-off, killing everyone on board.

What was seen by him just a few moments ago as something to get angry and complain about, suddenly in an instant becomes something he is incredibly grateful for. I'm sure you can think of similar situations that have happened to you, in which something happened that you initially judged negatively, but which actually turned out to be to your benefit?

Of course, this doesn't mean that we decide to just blindly accept anything and everything that happens to us as 'good', and have no sense of discrimination or personal preference.

For me, having a strong positive mental attitude is a process of deliberately looking for solutions - the good in any situation, while holding an expectation for the best.

Nor is a positive mental attitude just affirming positive things to yourself - it's mostly about how you handle the setbacks, defeats, challenges, and downright failures that happen to us all.

Anyone can be positive and confident when things are going well, but only someone with a truly positive mental attitude can walk off the playing field after a loss, or poorer than expected performance, with their head held high thinking about the positive aspects of their performance, and what they will do over the coming weeks to turn things around.

Try this quiz

1. Name the Australian Open tennis winners - male and female, for the past five years?
2. Which teams won the AFL final and NRL final in 1998?
3. Name the past five people who have won the Nobel peace prize.
4. Who won the U.S. Open golf championship in 2001?
5. Who are the current political leaders of China, Brazil, Germany, Holland and Norway?

How did you do?

The thing is, no-one remembers for long the champions and leaders of yesterday. The people above were famous - however the accolades die down, trophies tarnish with the passing of time, and even great achievements are soon forgotten.

Here's a different sort of quiz. See how you do on this one:

1. Name three teachers who really helped or inspired you in school.
2. What are the two most important things your parents did for you that you're thankful for?
3. Name ten people you like to be around.
4. List five people who have taught you something worthwhile.
5. Think of three friends who have helped you through a difficult time.

Easier isn't it?

Remember, it's the people who CARE that make the difference in your life.

They are the ones we most remember and are influenced by - not the most famous, wealthiest, smartest or with the most degrees, medals, awards or sports trophies.

How many people would have you somewhere on their list? How have you been someone worth knowing so far in your life? To whom have you been a friend or a help in difficult times? What are you teaching the people around you by how you live? In all your striving to achieve throughout this year, remember this.