

## The Principles of Peak Performance

Few slumping athletes realize that the road from the pits to the peak starts in their past peak performances. For example, in 1968 three-time Olympic gold medal discus thrower Al Oerter was competing in an amazing fourth Olympics. After his next-to-last throw, Oerter found himself out of medal contention and throwing poorly. In the few minutes that remained before his final attempt, Oerter went off by himself and began to systematically think about his last Olympics when he had won a gold medal and set a world record. As he had practiced many times before, he mentally reviewed, in detail, all the sights, sounds, kinesthetic (muscle) feelings, and emotions from the 1964 medal-winning performance in Tokyo. Having recaptured these “winning feelings”, Oerter then, with his last toss, won the gold medal an unprecedented fourth time!

How could Oerter go from the pits to the peak so quickly? Was there something magical about this mental reviewing of a past great performance? If so, can you learn to duplicate Oerter’s magic act?

As Oerter demonstrated, the key to slump busting lies within your past great performances and the mind-set that you carried *into* and *through* those experiences. Over the years, hundreds of athletes and teams at the top of their games have taught me that, when you’re at your best, seven mental characteristics are *always* present. Not surprisingly, these seven characteristics are conspicuously absent when you’re caught in the clutches of a slump. If you can learn to mix the following seven principles into your mental game as you perform, you’ll be well on your way to busting that slump and consistently turning out one great performance after another.

### Principle #1-Passion and Fun

You must be passionate about your sport. You must be excited about putting it all on the line and being pushed to your limits by the competition. You must enjoy the struggle, the challenge, the ups and downs, and everything about training and competing. This kind of passion fuels you to become a champion. Athletes who wait until they win before they can enjoy themselves don’t do either, because they have it backward! Passion comes first; then peak performance.

### Principle #2-High Self-Confidence

How you perform is always dictated by your level of confidence. Average athletes or teams with above-average confidence will consistently perform above their abilities. Confidence is the magical catalyst that converts those long hours of training, your physical skills, and your conditioning into successful execution under pressure. Self-confidence helps you face off against adversity, setbacks, or losses come out on top and in control. Without self-confidence, a slump has fertile soil to take root and grow out of control.

### **Principle #3-Concentration on the Process of the Performance**

Concentration is one of the keys to athletic excellence. What you focus on before and during your performance will determine your success or failure. To do your best, you must learn to concentrate on the *process* of the performance, not the *outcome*. Focusing on the process means that you focus your attention on *the action as it unfolds in the immediate moment*. Outcome thoughts like winning, losing, getting a hit, or scoring a goal usually interfere with doing your best and keep the slump cycle going.

### **Principle #4-Resilience**

When you're really "on", thoughts of failure get no airtime. You have the ability to quickly rebound from mistakes, setbacks, and bad breaks. Should you stumble or get knocked down, you pop right back up, brush yourself off, and continue on as if nothing had happened. Mistakes immediately fade out of your mental picture as you keep yourself focused on what's important. Unlike the slumping athlete, you do not have an "inner statistician" keeping track of all missed plays, defensive blunders, and embarrassing moments. Resilience is a mental skill of champions, and it can lift your performance to the next level.

### **Principle #5-A Sense of Challenge**

When you're "in the groove", you respond automatically to an inner sense of purpose. You're on a mission and rise to the challenge presented by that mission. Whether it's certain opponent, a "last chance" competition, or the need to prove yourself, you are *positively* motivated to stretch the limits of your ability. As you rise to this challenge, you are oblivious to all the negative consequences of failing. Slumping athletes are negatively motivated by threats, fears, and the "what-ifs", a mind-set that keeps them stuck.

## **Principle #6-A Nonthinking, Automatic Quality**

One principle that is always present when you're "on" is a sort of mindlessness. You're not thinking; you're just doing. You're "on automatic", and all the appropriate movements seem to effortlessly flow out of you perfectly timed. You play out of your mind in this way because you trust your training and are into a let-it-happen mind-set. When Yogi Berra said, a "full mind is an empty bat", he was referring to the overthinking problems of the slumping athlete.

## **Principle #7-A Sense of Relaxation during the Performance**

The previous six principles contribute to Principle #7, being relaxed throughout the performance. Being mentally and physically relaxed is a must for you to reach your peak. Being loose in this way allows for lightning-quick reflexes; perfect timing; and fluid, powerful looseness, your movements are restricted and you can't perform to your potential.

Alan S. Goldberg. Sports Slump Busting. Llumina Press 2005