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Self-Talk: Trust your body to perform.

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Physiologically speaking, the human body is an incredible machine capable of extraordinary feats of speed, strength, and agility. When watching outstanding athletic performances, regardless of your sport of choice, it becomes apparent rather quickly that the body is beautifully designed to process information and move at a very high rate of speed and precision. When decision making translates into instant action it is obvious that there is no computer on earth capable of producing such well-timed movements which can be both offensive and defensive in nature and use the body so effectively.

We are constantly amazed at the abilities of our newest high-tech computers but often overlook the super computer which is the human nervous system. Consider how amazing it is when we see a military ground to air missile track down and incoming rocket using high tech computer processing to calculate, speed, altitude, and angle of descent in order to predict the exact intercept point where the missile can take out the rocket.

Then think of the outfielder in baseball as they are tracking down a long fly ball, calculating and adjusting their pursuit angle and speed to the flight of the ball, air pressure, direction of wind, and angle of both the ball and his body to dive at precisely the right time in order to make a catch; or the quarterback who throws a long down field pass which falls perfectly into the hands of a sprinting receiver. The mind and body are capable of producing extremely difficult physical and mental feats when they work together cooperatively.

The fact that the body is pre-programmed to learn and maintain life without thought seems almost machine like. The automated systems of

heart beat, breathing, digestion, muscle development, visual information gathering, and the continual learning capabilities of the mind are hard to describe. Decisions are made in response to outside influences instantaneously; both offensive or defensive responses are weighed and evaluated, when combined with the emotional aspect of the mind and how they affect the body you become aware of how intricately designed the body really is.

The Conscious Mind and Body

Practicing the physical skills necessary to accomplish these tasks is necessary in order to improve performance, but this alone is worthless if the mental and emotional skills are not equally improved upon through practice. The mind and body work together through the nervous system to produce a fluid well calculated performance. Once the body is trained, mental and emotional skills can either enhance the physical or tear it down. When all parts work together movement is graceful and fluid, almost effortless; but when the mind and emotions are distracted the body hesitates looking rigid and mechanical in its movements. This distraction results in doubt and second guessing, frustrating the athlete with poor results.

Back in the 1970's, Timothy Gallwey proposed the idea that we might actually have a talking self and a doing self (Self 1 and Self 2). Self 1 is the voice that is constantly giving directions and feedback to the body, and Self 2 is the part of you which is the performer; the doer (the body).

The body is very efficient and capable of performing at a high level in conjunction with the nervous system. I believe intuitively we as coaches and players have seen Self 2 in action when we are watching an outstanding athletic performance take place. "He/She is really in the zone today", "He's playing outside his head", "She's really in tune with her game" are all comments you have probably heard or even said. The idea that they are letting the body perform without distracting thoughts produces powerful performances.

These types of performances are controlled by a well-trained Self 2 (body), with little to no

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interference from Self 1 (the voice inside your head). Your body is simply reacting to the circumstances of the competition as if it were on autopilot (you trained it to do this). This is similar to the feeling you get when you have driven your car across town while talking on your cell phone. Your conscious mind is focusing on the conversation (Self 1) and your central nervous system is instructing your body to drive the car (Self 2); controlled by the sub-conscious mind.

The conversation created by the talking voice (Self 1) is one way and often very critical. The body, while trained to perform a task, responds to what the conscious voice is saying and compares it to information gathered during training. If there is a conflict between what is being thought about and what the body is trained to do, the body succumbs and slows down its response, resulting in hesitation. The more distracting the voice in your head becomes the less coordinated the body's response, until the athlete is so tied up they cannot function at the necessary level to be successful. A nervous mind is one which is creating scenarios the body (nervous system) cannot solve, then when the body fails the mind begins to place blame and raise false expectations until it becomes so accusatory that the body (nervous system) freezes up and goes into self-preservation mode. Athlete's at this stage often appear as if they are being ultra conservative or in coach speak; trying not to lose.

Consider a baby as it attempts to walk. They pull themselves up and fall down over and over. There is no internal talk going on about how to walk, or instructions criticizing their performance. They simply try again, and again. They are pushed by the visual stimulation of others walking and their instinctual drive to do the same. There are no instructions about how to move one foot then the other, transferring their weight from right to left, swinging their arms in opposition of their legs. They simply SEE the desired movement, FEEL the sensations of balance, and TRUST their new knowledge gained with each attempt. Their nervous system records every detail, every nuance, building a picture of what it means to walk. This non-

judgmental approach is very effective and soon the baby is walking unassisted.

SEE it, FEEL it, TRUST it. (Cook, 2006)

Dr. David L. Cook explains this in his book "Golf's Sacred Journey". He describes how pictures are much more effective as a learning tool than words. By painting a picture with your mind you eliminate the complexity of word descriptions. Words are complicated and often misunderstood in translation when trying to provide instruction for new or different body movements to improve performance. Athletes can become too emotionally dependent on the instructions and begin self-evaluating the effectiveness clogging up their central nervous system with unnecessary thoughts.

SEE the shot

FEEL the shot

Build a picture!

TRUST the shot

No internal calculations or commentary are necessary. No amount of instruction, or internal dialogue can help. Once you have trained your body how to move, swing, hit, or catch let your nervous system (body) perform using the picture you have given it.

References:

Cook, D. L., 2006, Golf's Sacred Journey, ISBN: 978-0-310-31885-9.

Gallwey, W. T. (1977), The Inner Game of Tennis, Random House Publishing Group, New York.