

Chapter 16

Flow (Optimal Experience)

Derek Tate

"To experience flow one must begin with a certain level of skill, training, and discipline".

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1993 p. 177)



Learning objectives – at the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following:

- Understand flow and why it is a desirable state.
- Understand the 9 dimensions of the flow mindset.
- Understand how flow relates to sport performance.
- Understand how flow fits with skill acquisition.

List of topics:

- The origins of flow.
- Flow in sport.
- Flow in snowsports.
- Flow foundations.
- Flow state characteristics.

The origins of flow

Flow is the popular name for 'optimal experience' and the construct originates from the 1970s with the term being coined by the eminent psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) within his book "Beyond Boredom and Anxiety". Flow is a mental state that is experienced when some, or all, of its nine dimensions are met (contained within flow foundations and flow characteristics). Flow can be experienced in almost any area of life with the workplace paradoxically often providing the right conditions: such as challenging activities and full engagement on the task.

Over the years Csikszentmihalyi and others have researched both people's disposition to experiencing flow and the depth to which they experience it. This research has included questionnaires, interviews and what was known as the Experiencing Sampling Method (ESM: Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) which used a pager to prompt people to fill out pages of a booklet, that they carried around with them, answering questions about their activity and state of mind throughout each day.

As was mentioned in chapter 14, flow is a pleasurable experience both during and after the activity and this has linked it to the state of 'happiness' leading to it becoming one of the pillars of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Flow is also, often associated with peak performance, although it should be noted that being in flow will not always lead to 'best' performance. However, it is for these two reasons: happiness and high level performance that makes it such a desirable state in the world of sport.

Flow in sport

In the 1990s Susan Jackson was the psychologist who led the way with researching flow in sport. This culminated with her writing the book **“Flow in Sports”** with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1999) which covers a wide range of sports including cycling, rock climbing, swimming, tennis, alpine skiing and many others. The book not only covers in detail the nine dimensions of flow but also has many first hand accounts from athletes about their flow experiences. One of the most recent books on the subject of flow in sport is **“Running Flow”** (Csikszentmihalyi, Latter, & Duranso, 2017) and this book not only includes the most recent thinking and research but also makes many references to the importance of mindfulness as a potential way to fostering flow experiences.

Flow in snowsports

There has been very little research done, to date, on flow in snowsports yet as a sport, due to the ‘open’ environment where it takes place and the need to match skills to an ever-changing challenge the sport really lends itself to this experience. The remainder of this chapter will look at each of the nine dimensions of flow: 3 x flow foundations and 6 x flow state characteristics and as they are examined it should become apparent to the reader why flow and snowsports are so aligned to each other.



Flow foundations

The first of the flow foundations is what is known as the **challenge skills balance** or CS balance.

This is a crucial element in how flow occurs. Referring back to the Diamond Model of Skill Acquisition (DMSA), in chapter 14, it is during the 'performance' stage that the learner can be challenged with the goal of making the performance more robust but also to begin to create the necessary conditions for flow. So the teacher's role, at this point, is to carefully choose tasks that are more challenging for the learner. In snowsports, typically this may involve asking the learner to repeat the same task but asking them to do it at a higher speed or on more challenging terrain (steeper, more variable etc). However, it could also involve increasing the difficulty through requiring the skill to be executed with a higher degree of accuracy e.g. when balancing on the outside ski the learner would have to steer the skis further past the fall line (complete the turn) while still keeping the inside ski lifted off the snow. The magic of flow is created when the challenges *perceived* by the learner are balanced against their *perceived* skills. In reality, this often means that the learner's 'skill set' should be slightly stretched. Looking back at the quote that opened this chapter the learner is more likely to experience flow when they are at a more accomplished level of skill. That is why many elite level athletes often experience flow.

The second of the flow foundations is setting **clear goals**. The learner requires clarity of intention both prior to the task and during the performance of the task moment-to-moment. Goal setting in sport is very common and essential, especially for elite level athletes. This will involve long, medium and short-term goals with everything working towards the bigger outcome. From the perspective of experiencing flow state it is the short term and, indeed, moment-to-moment goals during the execution of the task that are vital. For example, in skiing the short-term goal might be to ski short turns, in a particular corridor width, at a constant rate of descent, while the moment-to-moment goal might be to have an awareness of the required corridor width and the desired speed to ski at.

The third of the flow foundations is **unambiguous feedback**. Unambiguous means being completely clear and this is the kind of feedback the learner needs as they are performing the task. The self-check teaching style, (covered in chapter 17), requires the learner to have both intrinsic and extrinsic awareness of how they are performing so that they can evaluate their own performance on an on-going basis. So, returning to the previous example of short turns, for the learner to evaluate their own performance, while executing the task, they would need to *know* that they are keeping to the desired corridor width and be able to *judge* their speed. In a sense, there is not a great deal of distinction between moment-to-moment awareness of goals and feedback but the crucial element here is a heightened sense of awareness while actually being engaged in the activity.

This is another reason why the lower level performer is less likely to experience flow state because, as novices, they have not developed the movement patterns sufficiently to know, and have an awareness, as to whether they are being performed correctly. Again this relates to the DMSA stages: knowledge, movements, performance and flow, because at the performance level of skill acquisition the skill is becoming autonomous and the learner now has a sufficient level of awareness to know how well they are doing.

REFLECTION

As an instructor, how easy do you find it to choose tasks for your learners that challenge them appropriately? And are you able to set 'individual' tasks when you have more than one learner?

As an instructor, do you set and **manage** the learner's goals so that the learner remains clear about what they are trying to achieve?

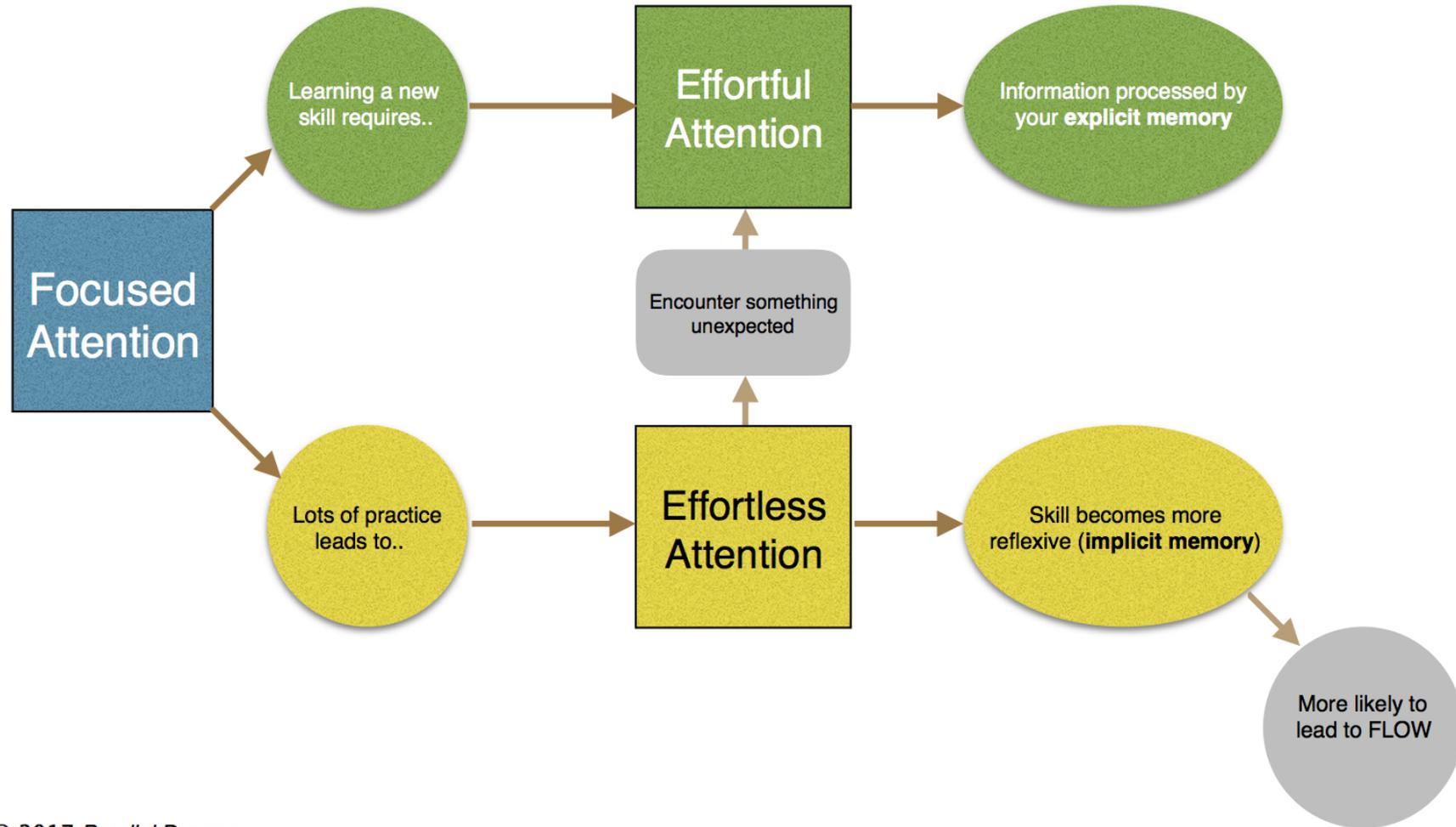
Flow state characteristics

Focused attention has been discussed in great detail already particularly in chapter 15, hence it is common to both mindfulness and flow. The premise is that developing the skill of focused attention can be one factor in helping to facilitate flow and mindfulness meditation can be used for this purpose. In terms of how focused attention relates to flow the suggestion is that because the task is so engaging and challenging that there is no attention left over for anything else.

There are perhaps two important points to grasp here. Firstly, that when attention is focused fully on a specific task it brings order to consciousness which has been referred to as *psychic energy* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The opposite of this would be psychic entropy or disorder, which would result in an inability to invest time towards goals. So bringing order to consciousness helps not only with facilitating flow but also with the ability to successfully achieve ones goals.

Secondly, and again this relates back to the DMSA, focusing attention becomes more effortless as the learner moves into the performance stage of skill acquisition. This is covered in more detail in the article titled “Focus your attention” (Tate, 2017) which explains how learning a new skill requires effortful attention while sufficient practice leads to attention becoming more effortless as there is less mental energy required. **Figure 1**, on the next page, taken from that article (and used with permission) illustrates how this process works.

Focused Attention and Skill Development



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Figure 1

Action-awareness merging is when the gap between thoughts and action seems to disappear. Performing a task will often feel easy and there is a feeling of being completely at one with the movements being made. In a sense there is fusion between the mind and the body.

Sense of control and confidence go very much hand in hand. There is a belief that one has the necessary skill level to match the challenge, goals are clear, feedback is on going and immediate which in itself helps to bolster ones confidence. So, the sense of control that is felt comes from the previous dimensions of flow all being met.

Loss of self-consciousness links beautifully to the idea that when attention is so focused on the task at hand there is little or none left over for anything else hence, there is no attention available for worrying about what others think or any other potential negative thoughts. This in itself is quite empowering and can help to build ones self-esteem.

Transformation of time is perhaps one of the most interesting characteristics of the flow state. Some athletes report a sense of time shortening and because they are so absorbed in the task at hand they do not notice the time passing. This can certainly happen in a snowsports practice session where the whole session just seems to fly by or when delivering a lesson that is so much fun it is suddenly time to finish.

However, some athletes also experience a sense that they have all the time in the world as they are performing and this is something that I personally can relate to. Imagine that perfect run (skiing or riding) either in bumps or variable terrain where there is a feeling of becoming one with the mountain. On those rare occasions, where this happens, it can feel like everything slows down and is happening in slow motion and these are the runs that live in the memory for many years.

The **autotelic experience** is an experience that is FUN. It is this characteristic of flow that links back perfectly to the 'love it' part of the IASI philosophy. Simply said, if you love doing something you want to do more of it. There is a genuine intrinsic motivation with the activity being done for its own sake rather than for any reward. The cycle involves loving what you do, challenging yourself as you do more of it, and gaining greater enjoyment. This is why flow is so desirable because being in the mental state is both pleasurable during and after the activity. When you experience flow you want more of it, you want to experience it again and again. It is, in essence, a legal drug and its good for you!

REFLECTION

How many of the flow state characteristics resonate with you?

When was the last time that you experienced flow during snowsports participation?

Summary – key points from this chapter

- Flow is the popular name for 'optimal experience' and the construct originates from the 1970's with the term being coined by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.
- Due to the 'open' environment where snowsports takes place and the need to match skills to an ever-changing challenge the sport really lends itself to the experience of flow.
- The three dimensions that make up flow's foundations are the challenge skills balance, clear goals and unambiguous feedback.
- The six dimensions that form the flow state characteristics are focused attention (effortless), action-awareness merging, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, transformation of time and autotelic experience.
- Being in flow is FUN, it keeps you in the present moment, and it builds your self-esteem and your sense of achievement. Its good for you and its legal.

Suggested reading and resources

The references below contain a great list of books on the subject of flow but perhaps the most relevant for snowsports are **"Flow in sports"** by Susan Jackson and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and **"Running flow"** by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Philip Latter and Christine Weinkauff Duranso. Both of these books expand on the ideas presented in this chapter and have plenty of real life examples from the sporting world. In addition the article "Focus you attention" (Tate, 2017) goes into more depth about this vital skill.

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