

**GRIT before GLORY:  
Emotion & Sport**

**Dr. John Heil**

Much is spoken of glorious moments in the zone in competition, but success is built on the grit of the day-to day struggle with training. As the Olympic saying goes, it's not every four years, it's every day.

The "Zone" is that all-is-right-with-the-world feeling sought by the athlete on game day. Like most things sublime, it is uncommon and elusive. Its mystery and rewards come to those who diligently seek moments of near perfection through the daily grind of training. If the zone is like the view of the victor from Mt. Olympus, then training is like the life of the soldier in the trenches.

Training is a daily struggle to balance this set of complex and opposing emotional forces

1. Pain & Pleasure
2. Well Being & Hunger
2. Passion & Controversy
4. Toughness & Tenderness

**PLEASURE vs PAIN**

"No Pain, No Gain" is an enduring but often misleading metaphor for sport. This is really less about pain than about the work ethic of sport - the readiness to tolerate the tedium and discomforts of training, the "emotional angst" of competition, and the risk of injury. It is about single mindedness of purpose and focus in the face of fear and adversity. The pursuit of pain for its own sake is a fool's errand, sometimes mistaken for courage. Too literal an interpretation of "No Pain, No Gain" is a harbinger of danger – creating undue risk and unnecessary injury. Enjoyment is the antidote to tedium. The athlete who finds pleasure in the game, brings enthusiasm to training and excitement to competition. The intrinsic satisfaction that comes from a game well played, enables the athlete to endure the inevitable hard times and to rise another day. Much of the sweetness of pleasure, is understood in its contrast with pain.

**WELL-BEING vs HUNGER**

Hunger is a palpable feeling of emptiness and need, primal and essential to survival. Yet without proper nutrition and hydration, the athlete can't perform to potential. Here, hunger is a metaphor for desire, the sense that there is something for which the human spirit yearns, that sport can provide. Paradoxically, the physical rigors of training and the need for healthy lifestyle may leave the athlete hungry for those things that are sacrificed -- be they sweet foods that tempt the palate, the early morning sleep interrupted for training, or the night out with friends. The athlete must find a way to take proper care of mind and body, even as he or she cultivates a sense of hunger in the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment. Without that uncomfortable feeling of something missing, there would be no motivation to search.

**PASSION vs CONTROVERSY**

With a host of rules written and understood, the hallmark of sport is fairness. The metaphor of the "level playing field" suggests equal opportunity to competitors. It promises that the truly best will prevail and that the cheater will be punished. It is the opportunity to succeed on one's merits that is at the heart of the allure of sport. But where passion prevails and reasonable people can disagree, controversy will abound. Inevitably, circumstances will arise that violate the athlete's sense of fair play, whether it be a controversial coaching decision, or the way in which the sports organization governs its future. Because sport functions like a democracy, perceived threats to the integrity of the game predictably inflame emotion, polarizing its stakeholders. Paradoxically, controversy is but a manifestation of a shared passion which at once unifies and divides. Resolution lies in the search for this common ground.

**TOUGHNESS vs TENDERNESS**

Think of the "boxers hug." This inclination to bludgeon an opponent into submission and then follow it with a hug, speaks volumes about the way in which sport brings conflicting emotions into play. Striving to reach beyond ones limits, in sport and in life, does not come without some measure of personal suffering. Thus the premium placed on toughness – the ability to get mind and body through the crush of chaos and uncertainty that is endemic to the competitive environment. While not conspicuous in day to day behavior, tenderness is an implicit element in sport culture, a counterpoint to the denial of emotion that is inherent in toughness. It is the moment of greatest threat and tension that gives way to the strongest emotion, be it the unbridled joy of the victors or the shared support in sadness of the vanquished. The end of a life in sport is seldom encountered without tears, or without fond memories of those who shared its most compelling moments.

The idea of life as a struggle to balance opposing forces is not for sport alone. It can be found in the ancient philosophy of Taoism and the psychoanalytic theory of Freud. Training is an emotional trial by fire. The path to the zone lies in ability to resolve the paradox posed by the complementary but contradictory emotions that are the athlete's daily companion.

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