

Spirituality and the Sporting Life

by Barry Robbins, ITPI Vice President, Mastery teacher and ITP SF Co-leader

"The elements of sport are present in other transformative practices, but in the context of sports they evoke a greater range of physical abilities than produced by any other family of disciplines."

-Michael Murphy from *The Future of the Body*

For quite some time, the worlds of sports and spirituality have remained largely separated and, in many instances, in opposition to one another. Sporting enthusiasts have harbored certain stereotypical points of view about those in the world of spirituality and vice versa. As we look at the very essence of both of these transformative practices, there is an emerging understanding that sports and spirituality are two souls drawing from the same well, and represent similar expressions of larger world views and shared themes, some of which are enumerated here:

- Sports and spirituality as transformative practices
- The integral in both athleticism and spiritual endeavors
- Supernormalities in sports and mysticism

Sports serve as the great Western metaphor, a showcase for the extraordinary, as both players and the viewing public are bearing witness to extraordinary human functioning and, in turn, the evolution of our species. Athletes are breaking records at an unheard of pace, galvanizing the viewing public with gravity defying-feats and other-worldly displays of athleticism that have never been seen before. There are new, emergent classes of sports that were not even in existence a few years ago that take performance to the edge of life and death.

What we are both participating in and witnessing is nothing less than the realization of our human potential, our evolutionary birthright. Sport is a potent medium in which billions are awed by mind-bending displays of coordination, stamina, agility, concentration, fearlessness and other supernormal capacities. In short, we are living in a theater for the remarkable, which continues to grow right in front of our eyes.

To watch these Western siddhis is to understand that there are many similarities between sports and spirituality. When athletes experience time slowing down or standing still, being in the present moment, having a unitive state of oneness with all and much more, they undergo a transformation of consciousness. These states of exhilaration include other paranormal phenomenon, such as ESP, intuition, synchronicity, déjà vu experiences, remote viewing, clairvoyance, clairsentience, telepathy and other forms of subtle energy of consciousness.



New sports-oriented practices have emerged through meditation, reverie and contemplation, visualization techniques, centering and awareness practices and collective consciousness encounters. These practices are intended to be somatic, mind/body approaches that foster emotional resilience, mental clarity, physical agility and much more. They are adaptable for both the recreational as well as the competitive athlete.

Much of this occurs in the rarefied air of the flow state, a magical and heightened level of awareness that is spoken of in many religions and wisdom/spiritual traditions. Entering into the zone is akin to a satori or enlightenment state. Examples are the runner's high, hitting your second wind, states of grace and heightened emotional well-being. In spiritual practice, some of the pathways to accelerated forms of awareness and consciousness consist of meditation practice, presence, chanting and breath work.

Those engaged in many forms of physical activity, either sports, fitness, movement, dancing, walking, yoga or other forms of exercise, experience heightened levels of chemical and hormonal activity, increases in adrenaline, dopamine, opioid-peptides and a variety of electrochemical charges, in which the body goes through anatomical changes which translate into altered states of consciousness. Coaches and players are enjoying the benefits of cross-training, where elevated states of physical activity produce elevated states of mental, emotional and spiritual activity.

This energetic cocktail produces effects that are not dissimilar to various religious and wisdom tradition rituals that create profound consciousness realizations and take practitioners into the world of the extraordinary. In both cases, history has recorded remarkable feats of human functioning.

Now, top-level coaches such as Pete Carroll of the Seattle Seahawks, Phil Jackson and others are bringing visualization techniques and contemplative practices to their cutting-edge training methods. There is an evolving embrace of the integral approach for both individual and team efforts. The simultaneous embrace of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual practices are producing peak performance for top athletes.

It is interesting that a statistically significant number of athletes have entered the world of spirituality as both teachers and practitioners. Their background and training in sports have provided them with experiences of extraordinary states of consciousness, as well as long-term training. No wonder the attraction to the world of spirituality, as it holds many of the elements of the mysticism of sports. Spirituality has given a language to these altered states and given them a frame of reference for the athlete. These two disciplines also offer an understanding of the importance of consistent, long-term practice.

When held from the integral perspective, these two complementary worlds can inform each other about new vistas, new world-views and experiential, transformative practices that allow individuals and groups such as teams, communities and sanghas to appreciate each other and join in the path towards growth and realization together. May they both drink from the same well.