

FOCUS IS WHAT SEPERATES THE BEST FROM THE REST

By Allistair McCaw

I used to ask myself this question a thousand times over. What makes the likes of a Roger Federer, Tiger Woods or made Michael Schumacher or Lance Armstrong a class ahead of the rest? Why is it that every so often we have an athlete totally dominate a sport like these guys have?

Sure they all have spent numerous hours mastering their skills in their chosen sport, they were given opportunities at a young age to develop their potential and have all worked damn hard to get there.

Over the last 15 years working as a performance coach, I have worked with some incredibly gifted athletes in their respective sports and seen a lot. What I love about my job is that I don't know it all and I never will. I learn every day and that's why I do what I do. No day is the same and everyday I have a different challenge to contend with. But the one thing that I have discovered and learnt only in the last 2 or 3 years, is that focus is what separates the very best from the rest.

In my opinion the athletes I mentioned above have better focus than all their counterparts without a doubt. The ability to focus on the task at hand, to the exclusion of everything else. They are able to channel all their energy and effort into that next point, shot, corner or attack better than their opponents. Nothing else matters but that next point or shot.

When I watch Tiger or Roger on tv and listen to the commentators babble on about their upbringing, talent, superior skills and bank accounts, the one thing they fail to mention is their ability to focus better than their competitors. In my opinion anyone who competes at this level has enough "talent", worked hard to get there and have refined skills. But how many have taken the time and effort to practise the art of focus like these two?

Switch on, switch off

An athlete with incredible focus that I can worked with was the world number 1 and world champion in squash, Nicole David. Like her closest rival Natalie Grinham, they play the game with panache and at an incredibly high intensity due to their superior athletic skills and work ethic. But what struck me the most about Nicole was her ability to switch on and switch off within an instant. She had a switch that could be turned on the second she stepped on court and be totally absorbed in her game and then the second she stepped off she was able to switch off.

Another athlete who had was 'in the zone' was former Wimbledon semi finalist and world number 4 in tennis Jelena Dokic. She would hear or see nothing else other than the ball and court. In fact she wasn't interested in anything else but what she was doing at that moment on court. All that mattered to her was playing tennis and getting better. Her focus and intensity was so high that when on court or in the gym she spoke to nobody else but the person she was working with at that time. That's focus at it's best.

Probably the best focused athletes of all are those involved in high speed sports like motor racing or bikes. Even when they are practising their lives are at risk. One mistake made is crucial and can cost them their lives. Now can you try implement that type of focus into your training practices?

On a more funny side regarding focus I can remember watching sport on tv when still living at home with my parents. My mom would sometimes have to ask me 3 times about something before I responded. I was so focused on what was going on at that moment that I would honestly not hear a word she said. She often wished I had this same focus and intensity when it came to my school books.

So how does one become more focused?

When watching matches, especially involving juniors, I often hear coaches telling their pupils to "focus" more. What they fail to realise is that focus is not simply just learnt during competition. Just like your sport specific skills and technique, it is self learnt and implemented through hours and hours on the practises court or field.

As a matter of fact it can also be improved in your every day life through techniques such as visualization, meditation and yoga for example. It simply involves committing yourself to a certain task for a specified time period and making a conscientious commitment to yourself that all that

matters is giving your full attention to the task at hand be in on the practice court or even reading a book.

There is so much noise in our lives, literally and figuratively, that it sometimes seems nearly impossible. We all carry our own issues and troubles, some bigger than others, but as an athlete you need to learn to leave your 'trouble suitcase' at the door before you step into the arena. I often remind athlete's that the place they train or compete at should be their domain of self expression, focus and freedom away from life's obstacles and other challenges.

Focus or lack of can be the difference between a winning and losing performance.

Last year I conducted a questionnaire with various athletes who I work with on all the elements that effect performance. The one thing that came up consistently in their post match analysis wasn't the obvious factors like fitness, fatigue, technique or tactics. The most common response was the focus they had or lacked that determined a winning or losing performance. Factors that influenced a lack of focus included things like a bad call, someone in the crowd or their opponent doing something that irritated them.

Here's the good news: focus is not a gift given to some, it's a choice. Besides the hours they put in, a Federer or Woods may have talent, but the one thing they have mastered better than anyone else is their focus in what they do.

I can honestly say that in my experience working with athletes of all levels is that focus is what makes the difference between the best and the rest. And on that note, I'm switching off.