

# INTENSITY



## Unlock the Power of Your Mind

### *Chapter XI – INTENSITY*

When athletes are “flowing” or “in the zone,” they are maintaining a certain intensity level while being mindful of the moment, which helps them achieve their peak performance. Since a direct relationship exists between performance quality and intensity level, your performance may be poorest when your intensity level is too low (you feel tired or disinterested) or too high (you feel worried or overexcited.) For example, if your intensity level is low when competing against an unranked opponent, your play might be sloppy. Conversely, if our intensity level is high when competing against the top-ranked opponent, you may play at too hurried a pace.

To get in the zone, each athlete has an optimal intensity level for peak performance, depending on their sport. For example, golf is a game of calm,



serenity, and narrow focus.

American football, on the other hand, is associated with passion, emotion, and excitement. Yet a golfer might need to increase his or her intensity level to blast a long drive, while a quarterback might need to decrease his intensity level for precision passing. A ski racer needs to go “all out,” from the start to the finish.

To find your zone – or “golden median” – so you can perform at your best, you must learn to throttle up or throttle down to find the ideal intensity for each situation. A biathlete, for instance, must be able to throttle up for cross-country

skiing and then throttle down to sharpen his or her results on the rifle range. Consider the following strategies to increase or decrease your intensity levels to meet the demand of the situation.

*Throttle up.* Imagine you need to increase your intensity to complete your final set of bench presses at the gym or overcome a lower than expected result of your first run in alpine ski racing. Here are some strategies for throttling up.

- Take three to five forceful breaths
- Create a powerful image such as a battleship, a fierce animal, or a volcanic eruption. Or simply picture a successful lift/run/game beforehand.
- Make powerful movements such as pumping your fist or clapping your hands
- Repeat energizing thoughts such as “Yes, I can!” or “Get your A-game on!”
- Recall your favorite up-tempo song

*Throttle down.* Perhaps you need to decrease your intensity level between periods of a hockey game or innings of a baseball or softball game. Here are a few ways you can throttle down.

- Take three to five calming breaths
- Imagine a serene scene such as a cool mountain lake
- Perform light stretches
- Think calming thoughts such as “Clear mind, relaxed body”
- Recall your favorite relaxing song

Most athletes are under-activated for practice (“This doesn’t matter”) and over-activated for games/races (“This means everything!”) The next time you are practicing or competing, ask yourself, “Is my intensity level too low, too high, or just right?” Adjust accordingly to achieve your ideal zone for peak performance.

## **Energy Regulation**

What is energy management? Basically, your energy state is how relaxed or activated you are, it’s the level of emotional “high” or “low” that you feel, and it’s the physical and mental readiness state of an athlete at any given time. Do you feel excited, dull, or somewhere in between?

You have to find your own “Ideal Performance State.” It’s a big term, but all it means is ready to do your best. Too excited can cause problems and we all know what sliding out of the gate in slow motion will do. Neither one is good.

So, what do you do? You can pump yourself up and calm yourself down. There are exercises you can do.

### *Ideal Performance State Exercises*

- These are acquired skills
- They are built and get better with practice -- A LOT of practice
- The more methods you have tried, the more you can employ, and the surer you can be that you have one that is right for you. Some may work better than others, depending on the situation.
- Some are seemingly easy and simple, while others might seem complex, and...
- You may feel nothing at first. Keep working at it!

### **Look at how your self-pressure/anxiety shows itself**

- Does it start as physical response like weak legs, upset stomach, weak bladder, or a racing heart?
- Or does it start from worry - like anxiety or anxiousness?

### **Knowing this will help you in choosing a preferred relaxation method**

- If it comes from your “muscle to your mind,” the weak legs/butterflies, you should look at a similar method like Progressive Muscle Relaxation. This is a fancy name for flexing and relaxing your muscles, learning to relax, learning to tense.
- If it comes from “mind to muscle,” worrying, you might want to focus on Autogenics. Basically, autogenics is a big word for the power of suggestion. Use your mind to tell you to relax or energize – “calm down,” “take a breath,” “you can do it,” etc.
- At its very roots is controlling your breathing, and everyone can benefit from breathing awareness and breathing exercises

Pretty simple, isn’t it? This doesn’t mean you’ll win, but it will give you an edge to do your best. For now, practice tensing and relaxing your muscles from your feet all the way to the neck, one muscle at a time. And... BREATHE! Find what works for you and breathe.

*“Your mind is what makes everything else work.”*

*-Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, basketball*