

# EVERYTHING FLOWS

THE ART OF GETTING 'IN THE ZONE'

## IN THE ZONE

ED SMITH

All things considered, I should have spent more time in form – somewhere near the top of my game – than I managed during my 13 seasons as a county cricketer. It was a deep frustration to me that I wasn't able to find my 'A' game more often and for longer periods of time.

But in one respect I am grateful that the sequence of my scores, the trajectory of my batting career, had such pronounced peaks and troughs. Although the lows were painful, the highs were correspondingly exhilarating. And now, from the safe vantage point of retirement, I can admit without sounding conceited (or tempting fate) that there were moments when I played almost as well as I possibly could. I feel lucky that I know what that feels like.

I had two spells when I found myself batting with concentration and freedom, and without anxiety. The first was the middle of 2003, just before I was called up to play for England. The second was the end of 2004, when I was finally able to find an outlet for the pain of being dropped. In 2003 I made consecutive scores of 135, 0, 122, 149, 113, 203, 36, 108. In 2004, I ended the season with 70, 156, 106, 189.

What caused me to play well for those two spells? Each was preceded by a period of intense disappointment and a sense of thwartedness. I think there was a direct causal relationship between my frustrations and the runs that followed. Failure beget success.

In 2003, I'd gone into the season full of hope and optimism, convinced it would be my year, but in April and May I'd been unable to convert good technical 'form' into runs. The games were ticking by without me making a mark. I felt that I hadn't got the runs I'd deserved, that I'd played better than the scorebook recorded.

Sustained performance often derives from that kind of distilled anger. Not anger itself – which is often self-destructive – but what happens once you have processed that anger and turned it into something useful. Playing with wild annoyance rarely works. But controlled fire is precious – the sense that you are righting a deep sense of injustice, levelling a score.

Prolonged spells of great form often derive from believing in a righteous reversal of fortune. Elite athletes have an uneasy relationship with the idea of luck. They don't wish to invoke luck as an excuse, but the sense of having recently been unlucky can be recast as creative fuel. But 'the zone', as psychologists call it, is something more specific than merely a spell of good form. It is impossible to stay completely in the zone over the course of seven or eight innings spread over several days, no matter how successful they might be.

No, the zone is an isolated experience of complete absorption, a period of time – perhaps no more than a few hours long – when there are no extraneous, irrelevant thoughts. If I had to choose one day when it really clicked, when everything flowed as if batting was my truest nature, it would be when I made 149 against Nottinghamshire at Maidstone.

What does it feel like, being in the zone? You do no more or no less than what you have to. There are few inessential movements, little psychological or physiological waste. Every movement has a purpose, a reason behind it.

Let me use an analogy from another sport. The difference between a great footballer and a merely good one is the clarity of thought that lies behind every pass. In his glorious, imperious late years, Zinedine Zidane's clarity of vision was so unerring that missed passes were usually caused by a team-mate who had failed to read the play. Zidane never passed a ball without purpose. Nor did he move around the field much: he had evolved beyond the point of needing to look busy. The

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husk had been discarded; only the kernel remained.

In the same way, being in the zone allows you to make small movements driven by a great deal of purpose. Concision of movement can be hard to interpret. Very nervous players suffer from strangulated, constrained movement, their feet anchored to the ground. And yet a player in the zone, totally confident of everything he does, is equally sparing in his movements. The difference between anxious stillness and confident stillness is the fluidity and smoothness of the movements that you do make. Anxiety makes you guess too early and move jerkily. When you are in the zone, you trust yourself and glide.

What of your mind? It is clear and uncluttered, obviously. Yet your mind is also surprisingly open. While you might not be cracking jokes or joking around, nor are you scared of human interaction. If a moment of levity inescapably crossed your path, you won't deny it on principle because 'you are concentrating too hard'.

Tunnel Vision is over-rated. True concentration is about taking things as you find them, with no preconceived ideas of how you 'ought' to behave. Naturalness – a lack of self-consciousness, even self-awareness – is at the heart of being in the zone. You do not fear reacting to events intuitively, without prejudging them.

I would distinguish being in the zone from merely feeling confident. There were days when I drove to the cricket ground feeling that the odds were in my favour and that gave my batting a jaunty confidence. The zone is subtler, more mysterious. The confidence is further removed from the surface. You feel calmness more than cockiness.

And you do not think about outcomes, only the process of the thing itself. You do not rush to anticipate what might feel like to make a hundred. You stay in the present, enjoying it for what it is: the feel of the bat in the hand, the rhythm of the ball arriving in sync with the shot, the feel on the earth under feet, a lightness and yet a rootedness.

Your mind is revving at the same rate as the pace of the game. There is no sense of being rushed (the ball arriving too soon) or impatience (wanting the balls to be delivered quicker). There is harmony. The world is cooperative; you do not have to bend it to your will.

I felt very clearly, on that day in July 2003, that my role was not to get in the way – to make myself the conduit more than the agent.

I wish I could have had more days when everything flowed as a cricketer. But perhaps it is better to have known true form and to have lost it than never to have known it at all.

**Ed Smith** was the youngest ever Cambridge undergraduate to score a century on his first class debut. He was a professional cricketer for 13 years, at Kent and then at Middlesex, where he was captain in 2007 and 2008. He played three Test matches for England. He has written three books; the most recent, *Luck* was published by Bloomsbury in April 2012. In October 2010, Ed wrote and presented *Inside Sport* for BBC1 television. He also wrote and presented *Peak Performance* for BBC Radio 3, a series comparing the shared experiences of sportsmen and musicians. He appears regularly on the *Today* programme.

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