

WORKSHOP

Focus is what separates the best from the rest

Focus is the key to success, writes *Allistair McCaw*, and the good news is it can be learnt.



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What makes the likes of Roger Federer, Tiger Woods, Michael Schumacher and Lance Armstrong a class above the rest? Why is it that every so often an athlete totally dominates a sport as these guys have? I used to ask myself these questions a thousand times over.

Of course, they were all given opportunities at a young age to develop their potential and they have spent numerous hours mastering their skills in their chosen sport; in short, they have all worked damned hard.

But so have countless other athletes. So what sets these guys apart?

In my opinion, they have better focus than all their counterparts.

When I watch Tiger or Roger on TV and listen to the commentators babble on about their upbringing, talent and superior skills, I notice that the one thing they fail to mention is their ability to focus better than their opponents. Of course they have the right upbringing, talent and skill. But how many have taken the time and effort to practise the art of focus like these two?

‘FOCUS, OR LACK OF IT, CAN BE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A WINNING AND LOSING PERFORMANCE’

Over the last 15 years working as a performance coach, I have worked with some incredibly gifted athletes in their respective sports. What I love about

my job is that I don't know it all and I never will. I learn every day and that is why I do what I do. No day is the same as the last; every day I have a different challenge to contend with. And something that I have discovered only in the last two or three years is that focus is what separates the very best from the rest: the ability to focus on the task at hand, to the exclusion of everything else.

Last year I conducted a questionnaire with various athletes I work with on all the elements that affect performance. The one thing that came up most consistently in their post-match analyses wasn't an obvious factor like fitness, fatigue, technique or tactics. It was focus – and the fact that its presence or absence determined a winning or losing performance. Factors that militated against focus included things like a bad call, someone in the crowd or their opponent doing something that irritated them.

The top performers 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.

SWITCH ON, SWITCH OFF

A squash player with incredible focus that I have had the pleasure to work with is the world number 1 and world champion, Nicol David. Like her close rival Natalie Grinham, she plays the game with panache and at an incredibly high intensity. But what struck me most about Nicol was her ability to switch on and switch off within an instant. The second she stepped on court she would be totally absorbed in her game, and the second she stepped off she was able to switch off.

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

Probably the most highly 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 can cost them their lives. Imagine bringing that type of focus into your own training.

INCREASING FOCUS

So how do you 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 focusing is not learnt during competition. Just like skills and technique, it is learnt during hours and hours of on-court practice.

In fact, focus can be improved in your everyday life through techniques such as visualisation, meditation and yoga. It simply involves committing yourself to a certain task for a specified period and making a conscious commitment to give your full attention to the task at hand for that period.

There is so much noise, so much distraction in our lives that it sometimes seems nearly impossible to focus on anything. We all have troubles, some bigger than others, but

as an athlete you need to learn to leave your ‘trouble suitcase’ at the door when you step into the arena. I often remind athletes that the place they train or compete should be their domain of self-expression, where they are free from life's obstacles and other challenges.

Focus is not a gift; it's a choice. Besides the hours they put in refining their skills and the talent they undoubtedly have, the Federers and the Woods of this world are where they are largely because they have mastered the art of focusing better than anyone else.

And on that note, I'm switching off.



Roger Federer