

Perspectives of Exceptional Adolescent Athletes and Musicians: Exploring the Meaning and Value Attached to Performance

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Abstract

This study investigated the views of exceptional adolescent performers who embraced challenges and lived close to their potential. The participants were ten young performers (seven athletes and three musicians) who were identified as top performers who also had their lives together. In-depth interviews revealed that these exceptional adolescent performers strived to maintain balance in their lives, built positive relationships with others who assisted them in their performance pursuits, approached obstacles with a positive perspective, grew through ongoing learning and improving, completely absorbed themselves in their performances, and found passion in their performance pursuits and their lives. In this article we share the wisdom of youth that emerged from these young performers,

Introduction

Perspective has been defined as having many elements in one's life, assigning *meaning* and *value* to each element, and continuing to respect not just one but many or all of these elements (Brown, Cairns, & Botterill, 2001; Botterill & Patrick, 2003). Perspective involves being fully absorbed in

a performance and still being aware of the most important things in one's life (Brown et al., 2001). As for potential benefits, a sense of perspective can increase the joy associated with performance and life experiences and help protect the performer's self-worth (Orlick, 2000), help reduce anxiety and burnout in performance situations

(Anshel, Kim, Kim, Chang, & Eom, 2001; Bond, 1993; Orlick, 2000), re-energize the body and mind, and free individuals to pursue new levels of performance and live closer to their potential (Amirault & Orlick, 1999).

Brown et al. (2001) explored the concept of perspective directly with elite performers. They interviewed eleven elite athletes who were described by professionals in the sport psychology field as top performers who have it all together. The athletes defined themselves as enduring and complex individuals who stayed true to themselves and others, and who embraced the full sporting experience while being free from a preoccupation with outcomes and their implications.

There is minimal research on what perspective adolescent performers bring to their performance and their lives. Two perspectives appear in the adolescent performance literature. First, some adolescent performers approach their performance from a perfectionist perspective. Perfectionism in adolescents can lead to burnout (Fiegley, 1984; Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996), cognitive anxiety (Hall, Kerr, & Matthews, 1998), stress and depression (Anshel et al., 2001). Second, adolescent performers may become so completely driven by their performance pursuit that they begin to live unbalanced lives, forming a one-dimensional identity around being an athlete or performer (Adler, P., & Adler, P.A., 1987; Brewer et al., 1993; Parham, 1993). The formation of a one-dimensional identity in adolescents can threaten their self-worth (Brewer, et al., 1993), lead to emotional disturbance (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), cause burnout (Coakley, 1992), delay career development (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996), and jeopardize outside interests such as family, work responsibilities, and physical health

(Ewald & Jiobu, 1985; Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

The current study was designed to investigate the perspectives of adolescents who were able to *cope* and *thrive* both in and out of their performance domains. What elements of perspective did these adolescent performers bring to their performance and their lives?

Methodology

Two interviews were conducted with each of the 7 athletes (3 males, 4 females) and 3 musicians (2 males, 1 female) who were attending a private school in central Canada. The performers were between the ages of 17 and 19. The athletic director and music director were asked to identify students who excelled in a performance domain and who also seemed to “have it all together”. Those who identified these exceptional adolescents believed that having it all together included excelling in at least two performance areas – academics and athletics or music – and respecting other aspects of their life, including family, friends, and leisure time.

Some performance accomplishments of these participants included one female receiving a full scholarship to play golf for a Division I school in the United States, another female being selected to play for the National Junior Rugby Team, and one male who played with the National Youth Orchestra.

The two open-ended interviews that were conducted revolved around how each performer viewed their performance and its meaning. The first interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed based on elements emerging related to perspective. The second interview provided an opportunity to check our interpretation with the participants and to obtain further detail on relevant points.

Results

There were six main elements that characterized these adolescents' perspective: passion, balanced perspective, valuing people, learning and improving, positive perspective, and complete focus (see figure 1).

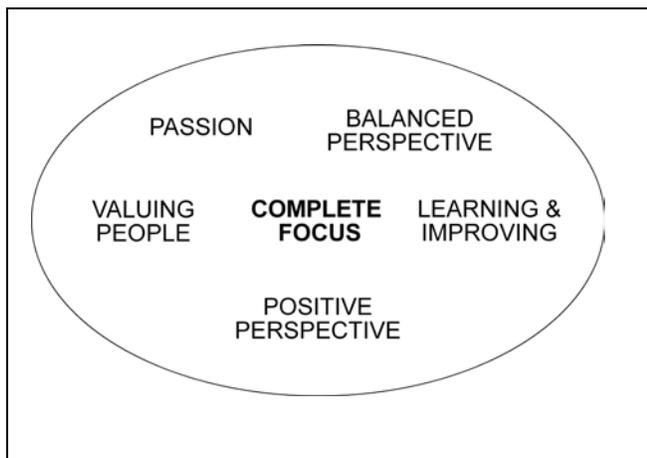


Figure 1. Elements of Exceptional Adolescent's Perspective

Each of these key elements, and their accompanying sub-elements are described below, along with representative quotes.

Passion

All ten performers expressed a deep passion for what they were doing in their sport or musical performance domain. They described their passion as a strong love for the performance, high enthusiasm, and a deep desire to learn and perform.

After playing for so long, it's my love (#5).

For me, passion is just playing my heart out every time I get on the field (#2).

I think that it's the passion that inspires me to perform. I don't think I would perform if I didn't have that passion. I

think if it wasn't there, I'd just drop the instrument (#7).

These performers felt that passion consisted of many different feelings. The most common feelings expressed by the participants are presented below.

Energizing

The first element of the passion is an energizing feeling that the performers get from performing or engaging themselves in the activity. There is an energy or vibe that feels great to them. One performer explained this energizing feeling in the following way:

I guess it's just a feeling of intensity almost. I don't know, it's like an adrenalin rush almost when you're out there. Just like a rush. Like an energy buzz kind of thing. I think pretty much the main reason that I play football is like that adrenalin rush...just the feeling that I get. I like going out there and playing football. I like the feeling of the game (#4).

One musician drew parallels between the energy associated with athletics and music:

People used to always ask me, why do you do these shows for free, because it's only now that I'm starting to use these as employment, to do gigs and stuff. But when I was younger, it was all pretty well volunteer. And I said, 'Well, why are you on the football team? Why do you go to practice every week?' I mean it's because you enjoy doing it and you enjoy the rush you get when you're out on the field, just like being out on the stage. And, so, it's really the ability to pull off the audience...I love the ability to get on stage and really have the audience in the palm of your hand and really

take them where you want to take them musically or artistically you know (#9).

It's [the passion] the excitement and the feeling I have for the music. Throughout music, they have little nuances, like forte's in pianos, and the way you kind of shape a phrase or something. And if you have that passion, you're able to shape phrases differently or have unique interpretations of the music...You have to have a passion for the music, in order to make it sound interesting.... And what I do before a good performance is...you look over your piece and you look over what you want to do and how the piece can excite you throughout the way or how you can show your emotion through it (#7).

In brief, the passion and accompanying energizing feelings served to motivate these performers and raise their performance levels. Their passion pushed them to work hard, kept them involved in the pursuit and helped them rise up to performance challenges.

Enjoyment

For all ten performers, their performance domain brought them a great sense of joy. Although the training and the performance itself involved a lot of hard work, they were able to work hard towards their goals and still have fun.

There are days when you're like, 'I don't want to go...I don't want to go and listen to coach drill' [Laughs]. It's just hot some days and pissing rain on other days and you just want to go home and go to bed. But it's so worth it. It's so worth the fun and the work and the tears and the sweat and everything. It's just fun in the en (#2).

I've had a lot of experiences where it's not fun anymore and my skills will then dissipate and I'll just end up leaving the sport. I know from experience that fun has to be a part of it (#3).

To have fun at least is the main thing because, I guess, what's the point of life if you're not having fun. If I don't like playing sport, there's no point in really doing it (#10).

These performers discussed, in great detail, many things they enjoyed about the performance experience.

I think there's just so many things about it [the performance]. It's really hard to point to one particular thing...I like going out and just like walking by myself on the golf course. Just enjoying the atmosphere, and just sort of everything around me and just kind of appreciating it for what it is. Sometimes, I enjoy putting with a crowd watching, clapping. Or sometimes, I might enjoy just going out with a group of people and just having a good laugh. Sometimes, I might enjoy seeing myself improve. I went back to a course I used to play on four year ago...And I just felt, "Wow, I've really improved." And kind of seeing yourself progress is rewarding in itself (#10).

Being successful is so much fun and it just makes you want to get out there and do more for the game and do more for yourself...You can't be successful if you're not going to have fun at the game (#2).

If you don't have fun, you're not going to want to play, or have that focus, or give up as much of your time" (#6).

It [performing] is something that I really enjoy doing and I think that definitely helps in encouraging me to do well at it (#7).

For one musician, feeling the joy and expressing love for what she is doing helps her connect with her audience:

You can tell when a performer loves what they're doing because it just comes through the audience. No matter how ignorant you are about the form of the piece or if you don't know anything about music, you can still tell when somebody loves what they're doing. And I think that's almost infectious. People grow from seeing a performance where you know the musician is just obviously in love with what they're doing, you're inspired, no matter who you are. So I think that that's really important that people continue to do that for other people (#8).

To truly experience joy through the performance, these performers stressed the importance of being involved “for yourself”.

When you play the game because you want to play the game, you're going to play better than if you're playing it because someone else wants you to play (#4).

If you're not having fun you shouldn't be playing really. You always hear these girls or guys who make a career out of practicing day and night and getting pushed all the time. They really don't like it. I met this guy and his parents went to his tryout day and I guess this kid missed this putt and then the father just goes up and goes beserk on him. He grabs the putter and just starts swinging

away at the green, and makes this huge gouge out of the green (#10).

In summary, engagement in sport or music brought many sources of enjoyment to these performers' lives. They believed that joy was an essential part of their pursuit and that it was a key factor in elevating their performance level.

Appreciation

Most of these performers expressed a sincere sense of appreciation for the performance pursuits in which they were engaged. For example, one athlete spoke of truly appreciating the opportunities that her performance experiences have given her, including the chance to develop unique physical skills, travel, and represent her school and country. She felt that it was important to take advantage of these experiences.

Another athlete sometimes took a step back to rekindle his appreciation for the game:

Sometimes when I'm playing bad, I'll watch soccer on t.v. And I don't know why but you sit and watch them play, you get an idea of what they're doing. And you start thinking about what you did wrong. You watch soccer and realize how nice of a game it is and why you like it again (#6).

One musician spoke of how appreciation grew with time, and another shared how enriching the musical experience can become.

I definitely have a better appreciation for it now. That's something that grows from the beginning...certainly now when I hear classical music or hear any kind of music, I definitely have a better appreciation for the sounds and techniques used...And appreciating it for all it's aspects and not just for the way it sounds.

Appreciating the way it's built, the way it's transcribed into a performance (#6).

Music is a full, enriching experience on a level far beyond. I mean you could take it on a spiritual level for those who are into religious music. You can take it on an emotional level. And you talk about all these elements and the ability to touch people. You know, singing at funerals is so... moving. And you're glad that your gift is able to bring peace to someone else. And not a lot of things can do that, can touch someone in that intense way. And so there's an incredible responsibility that comes with that. Because you have this voice and this god-given talent. You better use it to try to better your life and better other people's lives (#9).

Although each performer showed a slightly different form of appreciation for the performance, each form spoke to the deep passion that the performers held. They loved to perform and recognized the importance of the performance to themselves and others.

Fulfillment

Most of the performers spoke about engagement in their performance domain as a fulfilling experience that offered a feeling of completion in their lives.

I don't know if it can be described. Just think of something that seems more natural than what you're doing right now. To you, it fulfils something that you need to do. So it's kind of like a feeling of fulfillment. You love doing this. And it's something that just feels good doing it (#4).

The meaning comes from the emotional intensity you get from performing - the

feeling I get of completion, I guess personal completion (#9).

Just learning and growing as a performer, I find that performing is something that always has had an enthralling effect upon me. I get up on stage and I just love it (#8).

It [performing] is a test of my will every time I go on the field. If I don't get a chance to do that or prove myself in that way, I feel like something's missing (#3).

You have a passion for it...but not like a complete obsession over your entire life because you're just kicking a soccer ball around. [Laughs]. You still have to love the game but...you've got to realize that it's just a game. If you have an obsession, and you lose a game or do something bad, it throws you out of focus. Because all you can think about is that mistake, or that bad game, or that loss. And so it eats away at you I guess (#6).

In summary, for these performers, passion represents a deep attachment to learning and performing. They are energized by performing and through it experience a sense of challenge, fulfillment, joy, excitement, connection and completion. Performing is a central part of their lives, and part of who they are.

However, it is not all they are, as will be illustrated in the following sections of this article.

Balanced Perspective

The central element of a balanced perspective involved having a balanced approach to performing. All ten performers spoke of a number of different things in their lives that were important to them, including their performance, family, friends and school. Edu-

cation was also very important to these individuals and choosing a strong academically centered university for future study was a primary focus. The performers were also involved in a number of other sporting and community activities. They spoke about the importance of balance and setting priorities.

These adolescents described themselves not just as performers but also as individuals with many facets to their lives. When discussing whether being a performer was their sole identity, one participant said, “No. Of course not. But I do think it’s become part of who I am. I think it’s just too important to me not to become part of who I am” (#8).

Another performer discussed the value placed on performing in relation to his other life priorities: “I’d say it holds equal ground with them [the other priorities], which is pretty big” (#6).

Not only did all ten performers carry a sense of balance into their lives and into their performance, they seemed to benefit from the balance in one or more ways. These benefits are outlined below.

Stress relief

Seven of ten performers discussed their performance experience as a way of relieving stress. They viewed their performance time as a release or escape from their regular lives. Through their performances, they were able to take their mind off everyday worries and pressures.

Well, if I’m stressed out in school...I get into the gym, and I don’t think about those other things that are going on. And you can just get out and play. And even if I’m stressed, like even outside of basketball time, like school’s hectic or whatever, I could just go to the gym by myself and just play around. And it just

takes your mind off whatever else you’re thinking of (#5).

The performance actually helped them in dealing with everyday frustrations surrounding school, friends, and family. Their performance time provided them with a forum to release their energy. They left the performance setting with a feeling of calmness and felt more ready to face the everyday challenges. For some performers, the physical contact involved in their sport serves to release some of the aggressiveness they were feeling. “I guess you relieve some of that stress when you hit somebody (in my sport).It helps, yeah” (#1). Another performer felt that the performance can bring happiness when life is frustrating, and that this happiness carries over from his performance into his life:

When you’re feeling down or anything like that, you go to the soccer field. You have a good game. Everything sort of disappears again and you’re happy again. It’s just sort of, if you’re angry or anything and you just go out there and take your frustrations out (#6).

For many of these performers, the performance part of their lives served as a stress relief, by giving them a break from everyday demands and reduced the frustrations in their day to day lives.

Opportunity to rejuvenate

Five out of ten performers mentioned that leading a balanced life gives them a chance to rejuvenate and return fresh to the performance. Just as performing offers a relief from the everyday demands, the everyday events can also offer a release from the performance:

Just like soccer is a release from regular life, I think you need a release from soc-

cer too. You can't work hard all the time. You've got to go out with your friends and got to have some fun (#6).

The performers explained that if all they do is practice and perform, they start to lose the passion for performing and it becomes too much like a job:

So I think you need balance. If you don't have a balance...there's so many people that do that. They go to the course. They don't have fun at the course (#10).

I think you'd get sick of it [the performance] if that was the only thing you were ever doing or ever thinking about. Like I don't even really think about it during the days and stuff when I'm at school or when I'm sitting at home watching a movie or anything. That's my other time...It keeps you refreshed...If you're only focusing on just one thing and you don't have balance then you'll just burnout (#5).

Sometimes school even helps to kind of balance. To put things in reality. If you have other work you're doing besides music, it kind of takes away from your focus on that...And other performances go smoother, go better because I have school work there to kind of take away my emphasis away (#7).

Contingency plan

Four of the ten performers discussed the importance of getting a sound education, in case their performance pursuits did not work out as planned. Education gave them a back-up plan in case of a career-ending injury or lack of success at higher performance levels.

If I had the opportunity to drop school altogether, I probably wouldn't take it just because I know that I would be

kicking myself in the ass as for when my football is over because you can't play football for ever (#4).

I've often said, talking to the family, why haven't we gone off and try to do this professionally? And it all comes back to get the grounding. Because that is the most important thing you can do, far beyond the music. Because it [the musical performance] can be very powerful in that sense and you can get lost in it...I mean, many people have done it and many people have been successful so I can't comment on their experience. I only know from my own experience now that, I can see that having not had this grounding, I wouldn't be where I am today...Music is such an expression thing. And I've grown intellectually I think through education and my ability now to express to what I'm feeling (#9).

Without a sense of balance, which included respecting other areas of their lives, these performers felt they would limit their future opportunities and ultimately deter their ability to develop.

Just a game – more to life

All ten performers pointed out that ultimately they see their performance as just a game or part of their life, and that there is more to life than the performance itself. They valued their performance but also stated that others involved may place too much value on performing. As a result of their balanced approach, the performers saw their performance as part of their lives and were able to place the performance within the context of their entire lives.

I enjoy it [the performance] and it's a big part of my life but it's not the only part. And it's just a game in reality (#6).

On the big scheme of things, golfing isn't life (#10).

It might help me if I was less serious in the performance and kind of took a step back and put this whole performance in perspective, in terms of what it's going to mean. That's what my teacher keeps telling me, 'Just put this in perspective. It's not that big of a deal. You're just playing in front of a few people here. And it's not going to make or break your music career.' So you're kind of contextualizing the performance in your life. I mean it's just one performance. It's not that big of a deal. You're kind of looking at the other people around. You kind of look at the world around you and realize that you're not the most unprivileged kid. You don't have the most stressful position in the world right now. You've got to kind of get back to reality. Even if you mess up, so what? There's people that are starving. I mean, it's not the end of the world basically (#7).

Carrying the view that the performance is just a game and there is more to life has advantages. First, realizing that it that is just a game prevents these adolescents from getting too caught up in the performance and placing excessive pressure on themselves. The view helps them to decrease their worry and increase their ability to relax, freeing them to enjoy the performance. One performer explained how she maintained calm in an important tournament:

I went to Florida this December and I played golf with a bunch of girls and I was having a ball of a time because I'm not in the snow or anything – I'm down south. All these girls put so much pressure on themselves. And, obviously, I had pressure on myself because I had to go down there. And then there is a lot of

added pressure but, I mean, I kind of put that into perspective. I remember saying to them, 'There are so many feet of snow where I come from and it's hot out right now. I'm wearing shorts. Like, C'mon.' I'm just having a ball of a time. I remember I hit one, kind of to the left and I'm like, 'No big deal.' And the girls are like, 'I can't believe you just said that,' because it was a really tight competition (#10).

This performer ended up winning the tournament in Florida, and commented that she plays better when she is having a good time.

Another performer explained how she perceived the performance situation:

You'll see people [players] who are high maintenance and are like, 'Oh my god Coach! What am I going to do?' I hate that because it's just a game in the end. Like it's not going to matter twenty years from now. It's just a game. So I think it's just really important ...you can't let little things bother you in life, especially in sports. Because if you do, it's not going to help you to perform to your best level possible (#2).

It is interesting to note that when some performers who first said they viewed their performance as just a game, were asked to discuss their perspective in more detail, they also said that sometimes the performance is a little more than a game. "I wouldn't say that it's only a game but it's not life either" (#4). The view that the performance is 'just a game' is only part of their view of the performance. They are also extremely passionate about their performance and know that a certain level of seriousness is necessary to train and perform optimally. The important point is that they are able to deal with the pressures of overcoming obstacles because

they see the big picture. If these performers did not have a balanced approach to performing, or had nothing else in their lives, they would probably have difficulty seeing that the performance is just a game or maintaining a balanced perspective in their life.

Experience everything

A final advantage that performers mentioned in regards to carrying a balanced approach to the performance is the benefit of leaving themselves open to a vast array of experiences outside of their performance domain. They believed that these experiences offered great opportunities and were important because they are part of fully living.

I need to have different activities in my life to keep me stimulated. I think otherwise, I get into the fear of stagnation and just remaining in one place. Moving forward is really important and I always want to be moving forward throughout my life. So having the balance of different activities will keep me diverse and more open-minded, with the ability to move forward. You can always pick up a new activity or drop one or things kind of just come to an end. So you have to be willing to just incorporate lots of different experiences into your life so as to be able to move forward and be able, for me, to be fulfilled (#8).

The more opportunities you are exposed to, the more worldly you can be and the better you can cope, not only in the music standpoint but I think in lifestyle. Especially now that careers are much shorter ... So by having that wide range of experience, you can bring that into whatever craft you choose. Focus is important when you're going to record an album or perform. But not be so focused

that you disregard other elements and lose track of the rest of the world and the rest of what's important (#9).

You've got to have those other things there to help you play well. Like seeing my dad on the sidelines ... That's all important. Having my family come out and even watch the game means a lot to me. They like watching me play. I guess if I didn't spend as much time with my family, they wouldn't care as much to come out to my games or support me (#1).

Three performers discussed how they applied their learning in school to their performance domain. One performer explained that she applied the communication skills and determination necessary to be successful in school to her performance domain. Another performer felt that the questioning nature of academia can be related to her performance:

It [school] makes you kind of question everything and I think that has helped me a lot in golfing. Like the things you learn in school, you can relate it back to your entire life and to golf. You can kind of relate it all back (#10).

I'd guess you'd say it's sort of like a cycle. Soccer's tied to school. School's tied to soccer. Soccer is like a relief from friendships and then you need your friendships to help with soccer again. And friends are really from school now. It's sort of all tied together. So it's a nice balance. If one thing's out of place, it just throws everything out of cycle (#6).

By carrying a sense of balance, these performers did not limit themselves to just one performance domain but opened themselves to a vast array of life experiences. Clearly, they wanted to experience the full spectrum

of life and were prepared to seek out or create there opportunities for themselves and for their performance.

Valuing People

All ten performers discussed valuing experiences in their performance domain that were linked to other people. They viewed their performance domain not only as a venue for personal accomplishment, but also as an experience in which each participant benefits from others. When the performers spoke of what provided meaning in their performance pursuits, they all mentioned belonging to something bigger than themselves. They saw the value in “we” and not just “me”.

They were not alone in their journey to performance excellence. They recognized that coaches, teachers, parents, and friends were there to assist them in many unique ways. They saw their sport or music pursuits as an opportunity to develop long-lasting friendships, which added joy and longevity to the performance journey. Valuing other people freed these performers to perform for the benefit of the group, lifted them to new performance heights, and simultaneously provided deep friendships along the way.

Sense of team

Nine of the ten performers said that they have a deep sense of being part of a whole performance unit. Even when asked specific questions about their individual performances within the performance context, these performers would often relate back to the importance of team.

Well, when you play for a team, it's never about yourself. I know people often say, 'Play for yourself,' but not for others. But I think it's important to play for others as well because they're

there...just because it's a team really (#2).

In an individual sport I can get discouraged and decide to quit or whatever. I may give up on that challenge if it's just for myself. But when it's a team thing, I can stay motivated because other people are involved (#3).

One musician and one athlete shared how all parts of the team come together to create something wonderful:

And it's just so impressive the way it's built together to be this one entire work where there are so many different elements - like melody, and harmony and rhythm and tone. And it's just almost like a building. And it's incredible the way people can put that together (#8).

We get along because we have one thing in common, we're out there playing football together. So that helps out a lot... There's not one person out there that hates someone else. We just all get along because it's something we want to do and work together. It's a great sport. It means a lot to me just being out there and being part of something. That you can make something big happen out of this (#1).

These performers acknowledged the contribution of others on the team. They congratulated their teammates on good performances and thanked them for their help. They felt that acknowledging the contribution of others helped prevent them from becoming too egotistical or feeling superior to anyone on the team. One musician explained:

It's nice [to have the leading role]. But in the same sense, my concern was I

didn't want people to see me as someone who is so self-absorbed that I'm better than everybody else. They're all there to help me. They're all there to help the main player on the team. So you just have to be real conscious of it. And after a while, it just became natural, you do your job, they do their job, and treat everyone equally (#9).

When trying to decide which university to attend after graduation, two performers visited the universities and specifically asked the coaches how the members of the team got along together. Strong team cohesion was something they valued and sought out.

In summary, the performers saw their own participation as a contribution to the whole. They saw the performance environment as an opportunity to push themselves and others, and they appreciated the efforts of other team members.

Friendship

Another element of valuing people was the importance of making friendships within the performance domain. The experience went beyond simply performing :

Sports have always been a huge part of my life. Because, it's not just the sport itself, its the people you meet, the conversations you have, just the friendships you build with teammates...It comes way beyond the scope of the sport I think (#10).

Some of the friendships turn into long-lasting relations. They explained that you experience so much with people inside the performance that you cannot help but feel a close connection. For some, the connection seemed to stem from trust built on the field:

If you trust them on the field to do what they have to do, then it helps you off the

field. Like off the field, you'll trust them to do the same thing...And then, as far as friends go, it will bring you closer together (#4).

Having friends on the team helped them to enjoy the process of performing and could even help them to bring more intensity to the performance:

You want to go out there and not just have it be work. You want to have fun. And you know that if you're working with somebody...If it's your friend, obviously you're going to care more or try harder. And during practices and games, you're going to work hard. You've got to have someone there to help you along. If you don't care about the guy, if you don't like the guy at all, you're not going to have the same enthusiasm for practice (#6).

You just sort of build those friendships that...People that you never would have met otherwise. But playing on the same team for so long, we just...we have so much in common and we have so much fun whenever we're together. So I think that's the biggest thing it [the sport and team] has done for me (#5).

In brief, the performance experience is an opportunity for these performers to develop lasting friendships that increase their joy in their performance and in their life in general.

Support

All ten performers expressed the feeling that they were not alone in their performance pursuits. Family, friends, teammates, coaches and teachers were identified as their main supporters. Every performer felt that he or she always had and will continue to have someone supporting him or her in their performance pursuits. Each felt that they had

the support of some key people regardless of performance outcomes:

I'll go out and have a really horrible game but they'll still be happy because they'll still come to my game...No matter whether you play shitty or really good, they're still going to be there no matter what. It's nice to know that they'll always be there for you. They'll come to all your games and just be supportive (#2).

Even to this day, I've had so much parental support along the way that they've really got me to where I am. You need the people behind you (#5).

If I didn't have the support, I guess I really wouldn't be playing for something. Your parents come to the game. You play for them to watch you. I mean, if you didn't have everything there, then why would you be playing? (#1).

I think you should play for them [the coaches] sometimes just because they are the ones that got you this far in a way, just with their knowledge and support (#2).

You can find yourself getting too involved in it [the performance]. You can catch yourself when you're making these mistakes. And I think sometimes friends can really kind of take you back and say, 'This is why you like the game (#10).

Someone's always on your case about this and that, helping you. I mean they will get on your case about things. They're just trying to make you better and you have to understand that. It's nothing personal from the coach. So you can't let that get down on you (#1).

If your coaches aren't there and your teammates aren't there for you, thinking that you can do it, then how are you supposed to be able to believe in yourself that you can? (#5).

I think it [support] has to come from within a little bit also. I think support from friends and stuff and from people believing in you can really help and reassure you that you can do it and everything. But you have to believe in yourself. Because anyone can tell you, 'I believe in you,' and you don't, then you're not going anywhere. So it's self-supporting (#10).

In conclusion, the valuing people perspective involves viewing one's performance not from a "me and me alone" perspective. The performers see the performance as an opportunity to combine their talents with others for the purpose of creating something bigger than themselves. There is also a wonderful opportunity to build friendships along the way. Verbal feedback from coaches and teammates also provides support. Feedback from teammates is effective because teammates can relate better than most other support people. Performers also appreciate when instruction from coaches is positive and they tend to view almost all coaching feedback in a positive way.

The overall support network serves to help these performers strive for new performance heights, recover more quickly from mistakes, increase their joy, belief and motivation in their pursuits.

Learning and Improving

All ten performers discussed their performance as an experience centered around constantly drawing out lessons and seeking improvement in their performance. One participant commented: "I can never settle with

where I am. In sport, I always want to be that next step higher” (#5). This same performer said she loves to practice because that is where she improves the most.

Each performer spent time reflecting on their performance, learning from each performance and finding areas for improvement. Most of the performers felt badly after a poor performance but then quickly began to analyze the situation.

After a loss, well, usually the first few hours or so is just regrets. The things I should have done that I didn't do for the team...I put a lot of blame on myself most of the time and think about the little things that I should have done, that I didn't do. After a couple of hours, I start to calm down...And I sort of think about what I did do wrong and what I did differently in that game compared to what I had done in previous games that I'd played well or had won. I think about it a lot. I break down in my head just about everything that went on through the whole game, whether I was on the court or not. It makes me realize that when I go into the next game after that or the next practice, I'll work twice as hard trying to think about all the things that I did do wrong that I want to improve on. And then I'll just concentrate on small areas for starters and then I'll try to expand on them too (#5).

You can't help but try and figure it out, like understanding why you played bad (#6).

If we didn't win, of course we can learn from it but we should have learned during it. Whatever that team that we lost to had to offer, we should have recognized it earlier. Because that's what a good team would do (#3).

Reflection also occurs after optimal performances.

If I have a good performance, I try to capture the mindset that I had before that performance each time I do it (#7).

The ability to make a mistake, correct it, and move on is definitely important in terms of progression and moving forward and kind of keeping your interests and your abilities growing (#8).

I think I'm trying to play for improving my game on a certain day to a better score. Not just playing just for the sake of playing. I think a score is kind of to monitor your progress. And I'm not just going to play to try to get a scholarship or win some money. I'm going to play for myself (#10).

From where I was in the past, I've improved so much that I want to just keep it going (#5).

The joy resulting from ongoing improvement can be immense as illustrated by this musician:

I like the satisfaction of the sound that I make. Like one of my strong points is my sound and I find it very satisfying to get through a piece and work through it. Day after day, it can only improve. And I like the satisfaction of hearing my improvements...You always have the goal to get better. And therefore you base your work ethic around your idea, your goal of improvement (#7).

Although these performers strived to win and enjoyed it immensely, they were not over-consumed by winning. Four performers stated that improvement was more important

than winning. They viewed the performance as more of a competition with themselves:

I mean, you want to win for yourself, beat yourself kind of thing. To get to the next level, I think it has to be more self-winning...Measuring yourself against other people, I don't think that's good. I think you have to measure against yourself and work for yourself towards your goal (#10).

If you just keep improving, then you're just going to keep passing everybody else (#5).

In summary, all ten performers learned from each performance and steadily improved by reflecting on both good and poor performances. Small improvements, and viewing every performance as an opportunity to learn and improve, motivated these performers. Winning was a joyful experience that resulted from ongoing improvement which was most important to them.

Positive Perspective

All ten performers felt that they carried a positive perspective to their performance experiences. Even after less than optimal performances, they were able to see “the good” in the performance:

I wasn't overly impressed with that performance but I was glad that I was able to pull that off...I try to find the good things in everything...the good elements of it...And often a performance that may not be most optimal, maybe what you think is the worst, it's not so bad (#9).

These exceptional adolescent performers approached performance situations expecting the best and knowing that they would try to do their best. They were open to opportunities. After a poor performance, they

looked forward to a “next time” and did not dwell on previous mistakes. Some also drew upon humour to maintain a positive outlook when things were not going so well. By maintaining a positive perspective, they felt they were able to keep the joy in their pursuits and perform at a higher level.

Expect the best

Six of the ten performers spoke of expecting the best when they entered the performance arena.

I'm not the type of person to let things worry me. And I don't run around with 'what ifs' in my head... you have to go in and expect the best. You have to play your best and what happens is what happens kind of thing (#2).

For some of the performers, expecting the best was tied to self-confidence:

If you're not confident that you can do something, you're not going to do it. I'm positive, but I think I'm confident as well that I can do the shot. Because if you go over a shot and you're like, 'I'm just going to hope for the best,' the best isn't going to come. [Laughs] (#1).

One performer took a slightly different view on being optimistic.

You can be optimistic and that's fine. But if you've trained hard and prepared well then you don't need to be. It's just doing what you can do to achieve your goal (#3).

Do my best

Five of the ten performers described how they focused on doing their best and that's all they can ask for in a performance. When performers worried about the performance,

the view of doing just doing their best helped these performers focus on what was within their control.

Just try your best really. Whatever happens, happens. Just let things fall into place. If they don't fall into place, they don't fall into place. But, they'll fall into place somehow. What you want may not fall into place the way you want them to but you need to just keep working at it and you'll probably end up somewhere (#10).

When I start to get all worked up with all these [worrying] thoughts I just realize that I can't do anything more than my best. So once I've done my best, I don't have to worry after that because that was the best I could have done (#3).

One performer expressed a contrary view:

If I play my best but still get beaten, I'm not going to be happy with that. I'm not going to be happy if I get outplayed by another person...It's not just that I want to beat the person I'm playing against. I need to have a good game. But I'm not going to be happy if I play my best and still get outplayed (#6).

Having the perspective that all you can to do is your best helped most of these performers to see their performance in a positive light. By reasoning with themselves, they were able to approach the next performance positively.

Open to opportunities

Seven of the ten performers discussed bringing an open mind to their performance experience, being receptive to new ideas and open to opportunities within their perform-

ance domain. They spoke of their willingness to try new skills and persist with them especially when they were initially difficult to perform.

Well, for any sport, you just go into it having an open mind. Just willing to learn the new skills and drills, and everything that you learn when you first get into a sport. And it's hard work and it's hard to understand but no one's perfect at anything they first try to do. You have to just give everything a chance. And you can't give up on it the second you make a mistake or you're embarrassed in front of the rest of the team. You have to just keep trying. You won't get anywhere unless you do (#2).

When you're just starting out...you're not going to be the best. You have to realize that it takes a lot of work to be the best (#5).

If you're not open ... then you're not going to be able to reach your potential. You're going to get stuck down lower. But if you keep your mind open and you learn from the mistakes of the past, then you will learn from it and get better (#6)

After gaining experience and becoming established in their performance environment, the performers continued to be open to challenging themselves with new skills. One performer's willingness to challenge her creativity helped her to evolve as a performer:

I think music is something that it's always possible to move forward...There aren't any huge obstacles standing in the way necessarily. I find music is just something that seems to stretch on forever. It's something that provides you with kind of an infinite ability to grow.

And you can go down so many different paths in your creativity that you're always going to be better than what you were before. I think pushing your boundaries really helps to make yourself a better performer (#8).

As a result of their ability to keep their minds open to opportunities, these performers became better, and were continuing to improve.

Humour

Five of the ten performers spoke of using a sense of humour to maintain a positive outlook on their performance, especially in their approach to mistakes. They shared examples of how humour helps maintain enjoyment:

It's about enjoying it [the performance] and my personal way of enjoying it is by seeing humour in mistakes (#8).

I remember I went to this camp, this elite training program, and they were saying how that every single swing you have, say something funny to yourself. You know, I found that was actually kind of amusing...I did it. I think it really helps you. You can do it in anything, you can do it in any other sport you know. If something didn't go your way or whatever. You still say, 'I'm number one!' [Laughs]...I know it's totally unrealistic but it kind of helps. I know it's a bit optimistic but it keeps it fun (#10).

I think the release of stress that humour provides in a performance shows your humanity to the audience. If you make a mistake and you're kind of like, 'Oh!' If it's funny and you laugh at it then I think they kind of see that it's okay to make mistakes because you don't get all up tight and don't close up because of it.

And it keeps the openness and the connection with the audience going. Because they see that you're really enjoying the performance and it's okay to make a mistake because you're here to enjoy yourself and so are they. I think humour is important in maintaining your openness and the optimism of the performance. If you find humour in it, you're more able to bring something positive out of the experience (#8).

Clearly, the ability to find humour in challenging performance situations helps some of these performers to release stress, put the performance in perspective, and remain optimistic.

Always a next time

Five of the ten performers mentioned that they helped themselves regain a positive perspective after disappointing performances by reminding themselves that there is always a next time or another chance to redeem themselves.

If I do go out and I do have a bad game, I'll usually spend a while being mad. But then once I realize, I take a deep breath, and think, there's still tomorrow, tomorrow's game where I can turn it around. It was just one game that I didn't play well and I can change something the next time (#6).

So you just need to say, 'Well, you know what? Those were probably some of my bad shots. I still have good shots to come.' Just try and help yourself through it and just say, 'I just had two bad shots really. It wasn't the biggest deal in the world. There are so many other things going on.' And put it into perspective and say, 'It's not the biggest deal in the world...A lot of things could happen so you never know (#10).

A less than optimal performance did not deter these performers from persisting through disappointment. Their basic approach was:

When you get down, get back up (#6).

Move forward

One of the qualities of these performers was that do not dwell on their mistakes for very long. They were able to move forward to the next performance challenge in a positive manner by letting go of the poor performance:

I can't keep thinking negative thoughts about that game. You've got to move on and think positive (#1).

Performers felt that past mistakes are irreversible and that what happens next is most important:

Just shake it off. There's nothing you can do about it. Just go out hard and try it the next time (#1).

The thing about football is that you can't let what's happened before determine how you're going to feel for the next half. Like if I have trouble in the first half, yeah there's going to be those feelings like, Ah, shit. This was real bad. I'll feel bad about myself but then I'll try to check myself before I fall into a hole that I can't get myself out of before I get so depressed about how bad I've been playing. You've got to stop. You've got to look at how you've played and say, Okay, the past is the past. I've just got to forget about what happened (#4).

I don't think something was a mistake unless you do it twice...It's like sort of second chance in a way but it's also

looking into the future which is better than just dwelling in the past (#3).

In summary, the performers all had a positive perspective towards their performances. They expected something good to come from performing, were happy to give their best, kept their minds open to opportunities, sometimes drew on a sense of humour to keep things in perspective, and were able to recover from mistakes and look forward towards the future. The performers reached new performance heights largely because they were able to carry and regain a positive perspective.

Complete Focus

All ten performers discussed their ability to focus completely during both practices and performances.

When I'm on the field, I sort of go into a zone you know. And I just focus on what I have to do. And everything else is lost. Everything in life that's going on is gone out of my head...Because if you're having a problem with friends, girlfriend, whatever, everything's gone. It's not in the back of your head when you're playing. The only thing is your focus, getting on the field, whatever you have to do...I'm just thinking, Just go and play (#6).

You just don't want to have other things on your mind when you play. They'll inhibit your performance. Like you can't think about school, or your boyfriend, or the fight you're having with your parents or anything like that. I think you just have to be focused on what you have to do and how you're going to do it. And if you don't have a focus, you may make many more mistakes than you normally would (#2).

Their focus was complete in their sport or music performance, and then when they were in other contexts, their focus remained in that other context.

I think you'd get sick of it [the performance] if that was the only thing you were doing or ever thinking about. Like I don't even really think about it during the days when I'm at school or when I'm sitting at home watching a movie or anything. That's my other time. So when I step into the gym, it's just one focus. I just couldn't imagine having just that one focus all the time (#5).

I think the focus is essential for the improvement. I think if I'm not focused, I'm not going to get the improvement. And my frustration will kind of erupt due to my lack of focus. So I think those two are very tied together. (#7).

(When drawing out lessons for improvement) I focus on the mistakes I know I've made and remember not to make them again (#8).

I'll take mistakes made in the last game and use it to get me on the field and focusing on things I can do better. And then I try to do better. Try to run harder, move faster, hit harder (#4).

In order to continue to learn and improve, these performers also pointed out the importance of focusing on themselves and what they want to feel or accomplish, rather than focusing on others.

Golf is more you against yourself. If you focus in on other people and what they're shooting, you're done. You have to focus on yourself...This year it was really tough for a lot of girls because they're focusing in on the coaches

watching them. They think of so many things. Whereas, you really have to think that you're not in a competition and it's just you (#10).

Just focus on yourself and you'll be fine (#6).

(Just before I start) my heart beats fast. I kind of have steady breathing. It would probably be kind of like a horse, a horse in the gates before a race type thing. Like you're kind of breathing heavy and your heart's thumping but I'm not shaking and I'm not screaming or anything. It's all just kind of focus (#4).

You're always thinking of breathing, you're always thinking of these things, but you tend to try and take the emotion of the piece and let that carry you. And everything else just falls in place (#9).

You are sharing it [the performance] with them [the audience] but still concentrating on what you value about the music. And let that come through rather than worrying about how you'll sound to the other people (#8).

When the performers discussed their focus, some mentioned how other people had helped them learn to focus on the right things.

The coach is the most positive person, which is really nice to have in a coach. He's really positive and instead of saying, 'Well, that's really crappy,' he'll say 'This is more ideal'. So, it's more positive reinforcement rather than the negative stuff that you get a lot from people like, 'Why are you slicing?' or something like that. Instead of that he would say, 'Oh, it's just a little something at the end' or 'it's your timing' or

put a little more of a positive spin on things which really is encouraging. It helps you refocus on what you want to do. I think that's a key. It helps me focus (#10).

Focusing on Conclusions

The perspectives of these exceptional adolescent performers revealed not only how they viewed the performance, but how they viewed the performance in the context of their entire lives. The perspective elements may be better understood by discussing the performers' views both *within* and *surrounding* the performance.

Within the performance, the performers viewed what they were engaged in with a great deal of passion. The element of passion, love and desire appeared to form the root of their perspective, a root from which other elements grew. Within the performance, they were committed to learn from every experience, everyday. These performers saw the performance experience as a chance to evolve into something better. They were committed to carry a positive perspective into every situation, which opened them to a variety of opportunities that came their way. A positive frame of mind freed them from dwelling on doubt, hesitation, and from basing their self-worth solely on performance outcomes.

Surrounding the performance, the performers sought balance in their lives. A balanced perspective appeared to keep a performer's passion in check, so that the passion did not become obsessive to the point of totally consuming them. Clearly these performers attached a high value to their sport or musical performance, however it was just one facet of their life that they hoped to develop. Surrounding the performance there was also a network of supportive people who were an integral part of their experience. These per-

formers felt their performance experiences would have lacked the same kind purpose or meaning without the involvement of these important people.

We believe that highly developed focusing skills were a critical part of what helped these exceptional adolescent performers to *live* the different elements of perspective presented in this article. More specifically, their focus or connection with their experiences empowered them to find passion, live with balance, value and benefit from others, strive for improvement, and view things from a positive perspective. These performers were able to view their performance from a positive perspective because they learned to focus on the positives in each situation. Their ability to focus on the positives kept their perspective positive.

The extent to which these performers were able to carry a complete or engaging focus into different parts of their life, likely determined the extent to which they could live their lives with balance. A focus that is fully engaging can help all of us benefit from our various experiences inside and outside our performance domains. The challenge is to transfer this fully engaging focus from one situation to another.

These exceptional adolescent performers lived balanced lives. They were able to maintain an intense commitment to their sport or musical performance domain, without neglecting other important life priorities. They were successful at completely absorbing themselves in whatever they were experiencing in different contexts of their life. This allowed them to learn and grow as performers and individuals, to develop meaningful relationships, and to live their passions every day. The challenge facing us as educators, parents, coaches, teachers, performers, administrators, and sport psycholo-

gists is to help more performers to approach their pursuits with these same healthy per-

spectives. Hopefully we will all work together in this important quest.

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