

A Long-Term Consulting Tale in Professional Polo

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Abstract

This article portrays a tale of providing mental coaching services to a polo player for 13 consecutive years. While polo is not a highly popular sport, it is played around the world at the professional level and poloists like all other high performance athletes work hard to advance their skills, game level and to excel. My story telling starts with my way of becoming and being a performance consultant; bearing in mind the literature, theories, and research that shaped my work. I then share a polo player’s quest to excellence through a large pool of day-to-day themes extending from developing cardinal mental skills to getting older and the playing days after reaching ‘the dream’. Significant parts of our consulting work are revealed with creativity flowing freely in the forefront.

The Bits and Pieces of the Tale

The fall season has come and gone-- some good, some bad. So, the other day I found a quote in a book, Close Range, by Annie Proulx which I had underlined years ago. It inspired me...! Here is what it said about the “rough, bruising life” of a young rodeo rider: “... when he got on there was the dark lightening in his gut, a feeling of blazing real existence.” This rings true with me. The dream for my polo is that feeling of “blazing real existence”. In my own words: “It makes me feel alive.” One way that it blazes, when I am playing with all of me, is that my senses are wide open, totally perceptive, and acutely sensitive. Maybe it’s adrenaline, maybe it’s the sense of challenge about using great skills towards a big contest. Perhaps it’s my “love-hate” relationship towards competitive situations--Who is

better? Whatever, why-ever, I know that my gut blazes and I get that feeling of aliveness. (Polo player, 2003)

We started our consulting partnership during the time I was working on my doctoral dissertation. The student-athletes’ at the University of Virginia polo team intrigued my interest in the game of polo. After following collegiate polo for a while, I decided to drop my sport--alpine skiing--from being the focus of my doctoral research and explore polo players’ competitiveness. When I was conducting the interviews, one of the participants became interested in mental coaching, and so this tale began.

This article portrays my personal approach on providing mental coaching services to a polo player, for 13 consecutive years. My aspiration in writing this paper was to share a tale with those who often ask the

questions: How do you do it? How do you work with athletes? What do you do? I chose to reconstruct this tale as it includes a large pool of themes that we worked on during the years, extending from the first days of getting to know the athlete to the days of walking with him toward career termination. Most importantly, this paper is the narrative of a sport psychologist; my narrative presented through a rather simplistic, non-scientific, yet passionate, honest, and caring writing style aspiring to offer a rather unusual way of knowing (see Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006, Sparkes, 1998; 2002). The first-person writing style was chosen as it reveals more frankly the key features of my work and constructs more fairly this long-term consulting tale. Definitely a 13-year tale cannot be summarized in 25 pages, yet I hope that by opening up my notebooks, computer files, and unrecorded experiences I will add a pebble to our professional practice databank. As Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) suggested, I am also confident that each reader will have his and her own reflections on how the tale told here could have been narrated by them.

A Few Truths about Polo

Polo is not a popular sport in terms of fan, media, and commercial support (Beal, 1993; Milburn, 1994; Price & Kauffman, 1989), but it is a sport where athletes around the world try to excel and reach maximum potential. Polo is considered to be one of the oldest team sports played with a ball (Price & Kauffman, 1989), an elitist and secluded sport, an expensive and demanding one. According to Milburn (1994), polo brings together many sports on one field. It is like playing hockey, baseball, tennis, and soccer while riding a horse.

Polo teams consist of four men; three professional players along with the amateur

who pays for the team--the sponsor or patron as usually called. Polo teams may change their roster as often as every three weeks. Since this is how long a tournament usually lasts, there is not much time for building team cohesion. Most polo teams do not employ coaches and the role of the highest rated player is to coach the team. Hence, demanding and complicated roles are imposed on him and besides preparing himself and his horses for a game/tournament, he also has to care, prepare, organize, and strategize for the whole team. For professional players, polo is played year round. Accordingly, most professionals relocate themselves, organizations, and families from the USA, to England, France or Argentina in order to earn money year-round but most importantly to challenge their level of playing through good competition. Another truth in polo (mostly occurring to medium- and low-goal players) is that players' contracts may die out at any time the game result was not the desirable one for the patron, team manager or highest-rated teammate. Consequently, this increases the pressure for a win or at least a strong performance. Last but not least, polo players are greatly concerned about their handicap rating; teams are made up based on the sum of the four players' handicaps and most certainly earnings are based on them. Handicap ratings range from "novice" (-2) to "perfect" (10), are initially evaluated by local committees and then discussed by the national handicap committee twice a year based on the criteria of general mastery of polo fundamentals, horsemanship, sense of strategy and conduct, as well as quality of horses [United States Polo Association (USPA), 2010]. Off the record, a player's winning record appears to be an extra silent criterion affecting one's handicap.

From a practical perspective, the abovementioned truths add immensely to the demands of the sport. Aside from the physical, equestrian, technical, and tactical skills, the cardinal mental skills for succeeding in polo appear to be similar to the ones reported in sport psychology studies exploring successful athletes' characteristics (e.g., Gould, Weiss, & Weinberg, 1981; Orlick & Partington, 1988; Gould, Guinnan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). In one of the few books written about polo, Price and Kauffman (1989) indicated that in order "... to win, an athlete must possess certain mental skills: concentration, positive thinking, the ability to control attitude and energy, the ability to manage pressure, continuous motivation, and visualization" (p. ix).

The athlete in this Tale

He entered the professional polo circuit in 1988; reached the 8-goal handicap in 1992 yet in the fall of 1996 he was lowered from 8-goals to 7-goals. From there, he went straight up to 8-goals, to 9-, and then to 10-goals in 2002. As he was claiming each next handicap, he was getting stronger mentally, physically, technically, strategically, and of course horse-wise. There are no secrets on how he did it: He did it himself! Primarily, he was smart to surround himself with great people to work with and to be supported by. Whenever he wanted to get good at something he was open to look for the right situation and person(s) to learn from, yet above all he was committed to do the required work.

He was fortunate to have a family that in some ways shaped and at all times supported his polo aspirations. Yes, he comes from a polo family. Of course, not an Argentine

polo family, but even an American one makes the difference--especially when one's grandfather owns a polo field and when at the age of nine one is able to exercise polo ponies every morning before going to school. He married a supportive woman, veterinarian specialized in large animals, who dared to act as the best-ever devil's advocate when necessary. Last but not least, he has employed the same loyal, hard working grooms for over 14 years, who take excessive pride on their work for him.

He approached his polo career as a free-lance professional. This means he chose to look for a job every year, every season and not to be attached to a polo patron/organization for long periods of time. Being employed by a patron/organization on a regular basis would have provided a steady income, yet with extra household chores, such as working on the team's horse-string, on teammates' selection and preparation, as well as 'pleasing and entertaining' the patron. To his view, a steady polo job would also abridge his chances to play with many different great players, learn from them, and to pursue better earning deals every season, thus he was chose to go with the job insecurity that came with the free-lance approach.

Me in this Tale

I did not have a polo background at the start of this consultation. I brought in all that I knew about the psychology of performance and the player brought in all that he knew about polo. I studied polo from the sidelines watching hundreds of games live and videotaped in order to learn, see and comprehend the line of the ball, the right of way, the incredible messes that take place at knock-ins and throw-ins, and the 10 different types of penalties. I read most books written about polo. Luckily, this poloist was very articulate and talkative.

Concerning the fact that I knew little about polo when we started out, he saw that I was ‘giving him a fresh, different perspective’ and this notion eased my mind while it challenged me to learn. Still today, I am nowhere close to a polo expert yet through my work with poloists I built some solid knowledge on how their minds work and what it takes to play the sport at the highest level.

My Way of Being

The following conceptions, established through my studies, readings, and experiences, guided my work with this polo player and they are still valid for me nowadays:

- If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.
- Confidence is the sum total of your thoughts about yourself on a day-to-day basis.
- You will become what you think about yourself.
- You are only as good as your next performance.
- Luck is the moment preparation meets opportunity.
- Men are disturbed not by things per se, but by the perception of them.
- If you don’t have it, you cannot give it.
- In all that happens, look for the challenge rather than the threat.
- Being positive simply means that you see the choices in front of you.

Of course, most of these were borrowed. Whether they were borrowed from Epictetus, Leo Buscaglia, Bob Rotella or unknown thinkers, they were put to good work and never presented as my own with the exception of the last two.

The work of Lazarus (1966; 1981) Lazarus and Averill (1972) Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and others’ on cognitive appraisal, along with Kobasa and colleagues’ (see 1979; 1982) work on hardy personality gave me a practical interpretation regarding an athlete’s response to demanding situations (see Maddi, 2002 for a recent review). The idea of teaching athletes “through symbolization, imagination, and judgment” (Rotella & Lerner, 1993, p. 533) to view stress and anxiety as challenging, exciting, and beneficial was within my capabilities. Hence, showing a performer all three sides of a coin became a fundamental practice of mine. Furthermore, popular psychology mottos like “be positive, stay positive, think positive” were too abstract and generic, thus I came up with an operational definition of what it means to be or think positive (i.e., last bullet point in list above). Practically it appears to work well, as I simply ask and teach a person to view his/her choices in the here and now; nonetheless, I have no research data to support this notion.

Moreover, my way of being as a performance consultant was nurtured through some theoretical models. Bob Rotella (1994; 1995) taught and wrote about the two distinct mindsets that an athlete ought to possess; the training and the trusting one. The training mindset is great for practices while the trusting one is what the athlete needs when he/she competes, when he/she has to execute, to let go and play all out. The training mindset, is characterized by the concept of work; it connotes that the athlete works to progress his/her skills, thinks about what he/she is doing, analyzes, and questions in order to discover what works best for him/her. On the other hand lays the trusting mindset which is characterized by the notion of play and connotes that the athlete does not question nor think too much; he/she just

plays, executes plays and tactics, sees and responds to the situation-at-hand. The athlete trusts himself and what he/she has been trained to do, trusts his/her teammates and what was practiced with them. Trust is a key characteristic of this competition mindset, which ought to be learned and practiced during training sessions by blending the two mindsets. Recently, Eliot (2006) in his book *Overachievement* included a chapter titled *The Trusting Mindset* (pp. 3-18), where he elaborates and attempts to extend the teachings and writings of Bob Rotella. In this line of thinking, I help athletes view the difference between a game and a practice and develop strong and clear training and trusting mindsets. This approach also means that I disagree with the idea of treating a game like a practice session--since some type of evaluation exists in all games/competitions, these two are different.

Robin Vealley, a few years before she published her work on the multiple sources of confidence (Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman, & Giacobbi, 1998), gave a lecture at the University of Virginia graduate students' on these multiple sources (Vealey, 1995). Throughout my consulting years, the three main categories of confidence sources (perspiration, regulation, and inspiration) have proved to be a great tool. Based on the specifics of each sport, I always discover new sources to aid an athlete in believing. If one source is out of sync for a day, well who cares, there are lot more reasons to feel good, sure about thy self. All I have to do is to make sure the athlete sees his/her reasons to believe and uses the strongest one/s based on the demand-at-hand. Recent studies on world class performers' confidence sources and interpretations refreshed and offered further support to this practical approach of mine (see Hanton, Mellalieu, & Hall, 2004; Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007).

Bandura's (1977) work on self-efficacy also had an impact on my work. The 'persuasion' source of efficacy along with Vealey's (1995) 'confidence inspiration' offered another ace in my sleeve. Through trial and error, I found out that in some occasions I had to act as a 'crutch' for the athlete, to persuade him, to inspire him. This crutch function is fine for me, as long as we take the time to do the work and eventually remove me as a crutch. At all times I keep the end in mind: The day the athlete will no longer need my services.

Last but not least, it was Doug Newburg's (1993) resonance performance model that fitted well with my way of thinking, acting, and being as a person as well as a consultant. According to this model, each athlete has a dream, and this dream denotes how he/she wants to feel in his/her daily pursuits. The athlete engages in extensive preparation, including activities that enable him/her to live this dream. However, all athletes face obstacles and at that point some develop ways to revisit their dream before they engaged in more preparation, while others just engage in more and more preparation and lose sight of their dream. This cyclical process that guides one's performance, during which the athlete stays in touch with his/her dream, was termed resonance. According to Newburg, Kimiecik, Durand-Bush, and Doell (2002) resonance occurs when there is a seamless fit between how the athlete wants to feel on each day about his/her pursuits and the environment in which he/she lives. "Resonance is about moving toward a harmonious experience between one's inner world--that is, the feelings an individual wants to have--and his or her surroundings. It is enjoying the process of expanding one's self out into the world in an authentic way." (Newburg et al., 2002, p. 252). This heuristic model of resonance in performance

enhanced my practice through the use of four very meaningful and useful questions: “What feelings do you seek to experience in your sport on a regular basis? What prepares you to experience these feelings? What prevents these feelings from occurring? How do you get these feelings back when they are lost?” (Newburg et al., 2002, p. 263).

Most certainly, I am cognizant of and trained on developing psychological skills through techniques, as these are presented in various sport psychology courses and handbooks. After trying goal setting, self-talk, imagery, and relaxation techniques first and foremost on me and also practicing them extensively with athletes; I chose to use them when suitable, as a means to help the person-athlete develop himself along with his/her training and trusting mindsets and not as the main course of my work. In line with that, it is important to mention that my consulting work follows the recently discussed holist approach to sport psychology (see Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Friesen & Orlick, 2011; Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). If I had failed to see this poloist as a regular person; to recognize the man, the athlete, the husband, the father, the teammate, the hired-pro in him; if I had not spent enough time in tournaments and practices; it would have been difficult for our work to be effective and meaningful.

Our Consulting Tale

The fact that I started working with this specific polo player after he was lowered to 7-goals, meant that he had done at least few things right to be up there. About two-thirds of the rated players in USA carry a handicap of 2-goals or less while very few advance beyond 3-goals (USPA, 2010). Actually, since 1890 when the handicap system was initiated, less than 50 players have been

awarded the 10-goal handicap (USPA, 2010). Thus the basic idea was not to change him, as his approach to playing great polo was fairly successful, but to figure out what was not facilitating his progress at that point in time.

I did not use questionnaires to evaluate his skills and needs but a discourse approach: I asked and he shared, he asked and I shared. After the first few meetings that were spent to get to know the athlete, when we met we did marathon sessions (an approach taught by Bob Rotella), usually two to five days of face-to-face work while sitting in his office space, walking around the barn or the fields, having lunch or dinner, driving his kids to school and soccer practices, watching his wife do acupuncture on his horses, or driving with him to practices and games. On these days, we usually spent 4 to 6 good hours discussing performance issues and then I also spent time observing him (his polo organization and his various teammates eventually) at the barn and on the field. These hours allowed me to get into his riding boots, to grasp his day-to-day reality and world, his needs and desires. The marathon sessions gave us generous time to talk, to think through, to argue, to figure out what would suit him best, and to support him in developing a well-built reasoning for his choices and decisions. For the rest of our consulting days, calling, faxing, and later on emailing were valuable means of communication for our consulting work and the assignments I asked him to complete very often.

The first thing I did in January of 1997 was to organize and prioritize my notes. The key notes I kept based on what he shared during our first two meetings read as follows:

- Plays his best when he is creative and spontaneous; when he feels loose and the

game flows, which happens during practices but not often in games.

- If asked 2 to 3 years ago to share his polo dream, he would have talked about becoming a 10-goal player. Now his dream has changed; he wants to reach his playing potential, to be as good as he can be, probably a 9-goal player.
- Questions himself and his abilities as well as his horses on game days.
- Worries about others and tries to change their game as much as he can.
- Prior to a game he feels some kind of fear and enters the game feeling nervous.
- Feels awful after losing a game.
- Thinks too much and overanalyzes plays, people, and situations.
- What others say/think of him influence a great deal of what he thinks for himself.
- Uses his imagery to see poor and non-successful plays before these occur within a real game situation.

My interpretation of the hours spent around him and these notes revealed that I had met a troubled poloist--although he looked darn good on the field and in media presentations--who didn't dare to say out loud that he aspired to become a 10-goal player, who despised his pre-game nervousness, who did not trust himself and teams, who wanted to control things and teammates, who was pessimistic when thinking about his polo career.

According to my interpretations, confidence appeared to be a matter that needed fundamental work. Most likely, his lack of

confidence triggered the questioning about himself, his abilities, his horses, his teammates' skills and abilities. Presumably, it also had a role in the undue fear and nervousness prior to a game, the poor images he would see through his mind's eyes, the bad feelings after a game, as well as in his worries of what other people thought of him. Hence, I decided to focus on developing a strong belief system before touching on anything else.

The practical themes shared below are in a somewhat chronological order presenting how this consultation progressed. It is impossible to say that this is all the work we have done during the past 13 years, that we only worked on one thing at a time or that we did not revisit issues again and again. These themes were chosen to be included in this article as examples of our work, considering that some of them are of the most common issues that sport psychology consultants' come across (e.g., building confidence, developing positive thinking and attitude, pre-game preparation, etc.), hence in some cases recent literature that has attracted my attention as applicable is also presented. Important to say, that thinking out of the box has been at all times the basis of my consulting.

Believing in self, in teammates, and not in opponents.

The following questions initiated our work: If you do not believe in yourself, whom do you believe in? Have you ever considered that by not believing in you, indirectly you give your vote of confidence to the opponent? These questions triggered long discussions and set the ground for eventually discovering his sources of confidence as an athlete, a person, a husband, a father, a son, etc. When one needs to believe, my motto is: 'From all possible sources of confidence, anything goes!' I was creative, open-

mindful, and spontaneous as a consultant when ideas bounced back and forth in order to pick one that would help the athlete. I prompted and pushed the athlete with lots of why's and how's though lots of questions asked.

The answers to the questions I pose helped the poloist discover and shape his own way toward his dream; he made choices and decisions based on them, as well as specific plans on how to follow these decisions through to realization. It's not that I am Greek but I have great fondness for the Socratic Questioning (see Carey & Mullan, 2004) where asking and answering questions stimulates critical thinking and brings out ideas--it has been very efficient throughout my work. Based on each question a new one is formulated in light of the progress of the discussion. The basic notion of this approach is to help a person discover his/her beliefs on a specific theme through a series of questions that explore the definitions and reasons of the theme-at-hand. This is how I approached the poloist's confidence, by pushing him to explore his thoughts of himself, his inner-talks, his daily actions on and off the field, his determination, his worries, his dreams and aspirations. For example, of the first questions I posed on this matter were: What are three things you do very well in polo? What are three things you don't well in polo?

Moreover, I prompted him to think of his mind as a green mind that can be transformed into a champion's mind with time and work and to be as patient with him as he was with any young green horse of his schooled for years prior to playing high-goal polo. Why not use the same line of thinking? Why approach his preparation for high-goal polo differently? I also guided him through our talks to notice that what he thought of him and his game is what his confidence

was all **about; that if he managed his** thoughts he could own his confidence.

It was very helpful for him to realize that confidence does not come solely from being successful. Past successes are wonderful sources of confidence but not the only one. There was always a source that he could use no matter how bad the day appeared to be. The same way he swapped a horse for a stronger one within a game, he could also use different confidence-votes to boost his thoughts and feelings. Being smart and efficient meant that he would use all available resources to get to his dream. On any given day his polo-confidence could be based on one, some or all of the following sources (see the work of Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman, & Giacobbi, 1998; Hanton, Mellalieu, & Hall, 2004; Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007):

- His achievements from (a) knowing that he masters his polo skills and feeling good about them, (b) his past successes, (c) the game experience he had accumulated, and (d) the strong string of horses he had built.
- His self-regulation from (a) being physically prepared, (b) being mentally prepared, (c) having devised a strong game plan, and (d) feeling good for his physical presentation, e.g., fit and lean, strong, healthy, etc.
- The climate/environment around him based on (a) his support system (e.g., family, friends, teammates, grooms, myself), (b) feeling comfortable within the polo environment, (c) having good polo horses and trusting them, and (d) his teammates' strengths.

Following this line of thinking, his penalty-confidence was boosted extra by task specifics for which he felt good about and in control while standing in the 30- or 60-yard line. Such are his sense of competence from his horse-skills, having practiced hitting 10,000 penalties [see Gladwell's (2008) writings on the 10,000-hour rule for success], his penalty routine, his experience, his commitment and determination to get the ball through the posts, his mallet-skills, as well as the well-trained horse he had chosen to be on for the penalty-at-hand. Likewise, for the various parts of his game extra sources of confidence were recognized and put to use.

Preparing to the teeth

If luck is the moment when preparation meets opportunity, then in a game played with a ball that travels at 110 miles per hour in a field about the size of three football fields (300 X 160 yards) and eight players who ride at full speed, you better be prepared. Better said by him: "Be prepared to the teeth!" After reaching 8-goals, definitely a poloist knows how to prepare for a game. Nonetheless, the lack of coaches in polo is critical as each player has to figure his way of preparing without formal and regular guidance. In addition, preparation structure (e.g., team rituals, meetings, practices) changes as often as a player joins a new team.

Given that knowing you are well prepared is a source of confidence, we implemented "The 2-Nights before the Game" plan (2-NBG). I came up with this plan in order to provide pre-game structure and routine that would help him prepare, focus, and thus hopefully play with fewer worries. This 2-NBG was conversational in nature and included the following questions: How are you feeling about yourself today? How are you feeling about your horses? What

strengths does the opponent bring on the field? What are your team's strengths playing against them? What are the opponent's weaknesses? What do you guys need to be careful about? How have they (i.e., opponent) been playing until now? What does your team need to do to be efficient against them? What will your team do differently in the second half to surprise them? What do you bring on the field against them and what do you need to execute? What else is on your mind?

The 2-NBG was rather simple and appeared to work for him. I chose to start and end with the focus on him. It was important to talk about the opposing team's strengths but avoided ending our talks with a focus on them or even his teammates. Team strengths were also discussed as he was a high-goal player and most often had to devise his team's game plans A and B--i.e., the ideal and not-so-ideal plan. He enjoyed having more structure, guidance, and support during preparation. Eventually (this means after a couple of playing seasons), we made sure he did not get caught up in following these questions step by step, but gave himself the freedom to be creative as every team he played for and against was different.

Post-game thinking habits

The player's post-game thoughts and feelings after a poor game were very often too negative and had to be confronted as they had a strong negative effect on his life off the field and the days that followed on the field. A decision he had to make involved how he would view and evaluate past performances. The basic query was: Are you going to be sincere with yourself about how you did, correct the mistakes in your mind and move on or are you going to dwell on them, be judgmental, critical, and even label yourself as a lesser player? It was his choice. Whatever he chose to see in his

past performances ought to be decided bearing in mind the dream he had for himself to move forward and not back. Even in his worst games there were always plays that he executed well and those executions / plays waited to be acknowledged.

I never suggested or supported the idea of ignoring mistakes and weaknesses, but a huge distance lays between acknowledging a mistake, working to improve on it and being overly critical, dwelling on it, and tearing oneself apart. A mistake ought to be just a mistake. One mistake or 10 mistakes in a row do not make up a bad person, a bad player, or a failure. I wanted him to become very clear of the immense gap between a mistake in execution or a lost game and what constitutes a failure. Identifying a mistake or a weak skill/technique is a significant step but correcting or improving on it is the most crucial step in this performance journey. Most importantly though, we worked based on the idea that an athlete can improve his/her weaknesses by building on his/her strengths; not on the weaknesses.

The poloist worked hard on correcting mistakes and improving weaknesses and then on learning to trust the work he did. When the athlete trusts himself and the things he/she is good at, has the vigor to play full heartedly even when possessing some weak skills, teammates, or horses. Trust can be essential; according to the literature trust does not rely on proof and it can be decided a priori [see the work of Moore & Stevenson (1991; 1994) on trust, Rotella's writings on train and trust mindsets (1995), as well as Eliot's (2006) elaboration on it]. Hence, through our discussions I guided the athlete to have faith in him, his horses, his teammates.

Additionally, after a poor game or a loss and before allowing a bad performance or a poor score get under his skin, we conversed by means of the following questions: Is it worth worrying about it too much? Can this poor performance or loss impact your future life and polo dreams? How will worrying or feeling sad, bad, frustrated change anything? If so, then what can you do today, tomorrow, and the day after to change this? I encouraged him to give clear and precise answers without any but's, if's, or should's. When I was not present or available to talk, watching the video of his last game also worked well. When he watched his game on video, even only a few hours after the game was played, he would always see the things he did great and these great plays always outnumbered the poor plays.

A forgiving and forgetting unbeatable mind set

From my experience, an unbeatable athletic mind exists. This term does not mean that the athlete does not experience losses, frustration, bad performances or setbacks, but it means that the athlete maintains his/her drive, focus, composure, trust, and confidence while dealing with force majeure [see the work of Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton (2002) on mental toughness]. In view of that, an unbeatable mind has nothing to do with what one did yesterday, how he/she played yesterday. An athlete's unbeatable mind is thinking in the present for what is directly ahead and not already behind.

The task was to get the poloist accustomed to look forward to every next play instead of hanging on to a previous one. His loss of focus during a game due to poor plays had to be minimized via refocusing. The central themes in our discussions were that the unbeatable mind is confident, positive, forgiving, accepting and non-judgmental,

full of dreams for the future, tough in dealing with setbacks and obstacles, picky with other people's comments, analytical yet with limitations since over-analysis leads to paralysis, plus thorough and optimistic with preparation as well as evaluation. There would be times that the opponent could beat his team score-wise but they should not be strong enough to beat his mind. They could beat his skills but still not his way of thinking. Maintaining an optimistic attitude and a clear mindset that is built on solid decisions and choices, regardless of daily setbacks, helped him move on. It was this forgiving and forgetting unbeatable mind that took him to each next play, next game, next tournament, next handicap rating, and ultimately to his dream. Eventually, Next Play became a key phrase for the player on a day-to-day basis; steering him towards the desired direction. Next Play, along with his breathing-tree-reminder (he always picks one upon his arrival to the field), helps him focus and refocus as often as he needs.

Under this forgiving and forgetting unbeatable mind that maintains one's drive, focus, composure, trust, and confidence; developing a thicker skin was another essential gizmo for him because of the negative influence other people had on his confidence. "What do you hear in their words?" was the opening question. Hearing between words and reading between lines are common practices in all of us. Getting him into the habit to only hear and read the actual words without interpretations was key. I prompted him to hear other's opinions, advice, or comments in the media in a selective way: To identify the fact and leave out the emotion. If a comment lingered long enough in his mind, I would ask (eventually he learned to ask himself): Do you like this comment? Do you need this person's view on your way up the polo ladder? Upon answering these questions it

was easier for him to discard or keep the comment based on the criterion "Is there any use for it? If yes, what's in it for me?"

The dream of his blazing real existence

Questions in the form of "What is your goal and where do you want to go?" did not help us a lot. For a long time he was hesitant to express his polo dreams, too timid in articulating them and constantly guided by results and proofs. By thinking through the four resonance questions "What feelings do you seek to experience in your sport on a regular basis? What prepares you to experience these feelings? What prevents these feelings from occurring? and How do you get these feelings back when they are lost?" (Newburg, Kimiecik, Durand-Bush, & Doell, 2002, p. 263; see also Newburg, 1993), he finally tackled his dream. In the passage that follows, his writings portray his resonance, as any effort from my side to write this part of the tale would be very poor.

My dream is to find this feeling of intensity and total sensory connection when I am playing the game; specifically, when I am playing MY GAME. I can even learn to appreciate it (I almost said "enjoy it"!?) while it's there, and not only after the event. I reach this state through giving it my all; through thinking good thoughts which enhance my confidence about my ability to play well. Perhaps the stars just lined-up correctly? This is the challenge: getting myself to this state. And it is another state, one of total awareness. I'm acting by "letting go" and letting my body lead. I'm not looking much at other players (teammates, opponents) or umpires. I may have a short outburst at an ump or opponent, but my anger quickly dissolves because there is no time. I have the next play to execute, or prepare for. I am in it. My mind

is comfortably locked on my objectives. And they are simple and clear. I also enjoy a warm feeling which comes after executing good plays. I might say, “OK, next play”, but I enjoy the boost from my good goal and I feed on it.

I am human and unnecessary thoughts do arise even during best, best, best performances! “Geez, I’m playing one of my best games ever, I missed those two goals, I really want to finish my next chance, who’s watching, we can win this game, I hope we win this one, I just got out-dued on that play, let go and play.” These thoughts are there. But when I am living my dream, playing from my gut, I can deal with those thoughts in a very intelligent manner. I can recognize that it’s OK to have them--everybody does--and bring myself back to my breathe, my tree, or my “next play” or “play the game” mantra. Sometimes, when the feeling doesn’t come easily in a particular game, my best technique is to try to “just be there” with a calm mind, and trust that the game will get into me. That just “being there” is sometimes enough because it allows the sport to bring out my instincts, my anticipation, and hopefully my total connection with what I am doing. Outside the parameters of my polo field, good things come--accolades, money, team offers--because of my connection inside the field and because of my dream-state which, ironically, has a lot to do with not caring about reactions outside this match’s polo field. Even my goals of playing at the highest level of the sport for a long time, of being a great 10-goal player, of fulfilling my potential can be things that are outside the boards. What is inside the boards is that emotion of “blazing real existence”. Visit this often, go for it and--if it is meant to be--my goals will take care of themselves.

My dream is to experience the feeling of intensity that I get from playing the game with everything I have. I put myself in the most competitive situations possible because these challenges bring the “lightening in my gut”. Love-hate it may be, but these big feelings are my dream. They exist because I care. (Polo player, 2003)

This passage not only reveals his resonance but also the work that was done between 1997 and 2003 on his mental game of polo, considering the notes I shared earlier here taken when we started our consulting partnership.

Afterword

There cannot be an epilogue in this tale, since our consulting is still in progress. After being rated at 10-goals for four years, at the age of 42, the national handicap committee proposed that he be lowered to 9-goals. Still, he had a great string of horses, strong polo-skills, horse-skills and a playing experience that kept him at the very elite string of players. However, a new puzzle eventually emerged and two of its major pieces read: “still strong” and “retirement.” Multiple questions were then placed on our work table: “For how long will I keep playing; keep making good money; be able to support the lifestyle we have as a family; be in position to support three strings of horses; be in position to pay for this whole organization (farm, farm-manager, grooms, etc.); be injure-free? Minor muscle injuries last longer these days, am I getting older? What will I do after polo? Should I go back to school for a graduate degree, pursue a horse breeding business, a coaching career in the sport since some teams have started employing x-10-goalers as coaches?” Retirement proved to be a daunting theme. These questions required answers and these answers ought to come from him, not from me. My role was (and still is) to be there to

actively listen and exchange ideas; to help him organize his thoughts and to explore future career options; while at the same time we still work on keeping him focused, strong, and ready to play.

Today, he still plays high-goal polo and is rated at 8-goals. For the past few years the word retirement is more often mentioned and extensively discussed. The opening act towards easing up on his polo career came through revisiting the priorities that involved his family. From playing 10 months per year around the world, he decided to play in fewer tournaments and spend more quality time with his wife and three sons as well as to start experimenting with horse breeding. This move also meant selling one string of horses. The idea that eased the transition from 10- to 9- from 9- to 8-goals was 'quality over quantity'. Quality over

quantity was a resourceful scheme that had previously helped him get from 9- to 10-goals.

As Campbell (1991) once said, "I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive." (pp. 4-5). Whether it is about a green mind, a next play, quality over quantity, or what's in it for me, this poloist developed a strong sense of feeling what is meaningful for him and his life, on and off the polo fields. I trust that the work done for living his polo dream to the fullest will keep him alive through finding, nurturing, feeling, and living more dreams in the years to come.

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