

In the Zone with South Africa's Sports Heroes

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Sample chapter

Introduction

**The best and fastest way to learn a sport is to watch and imitate a champion.
Jean-Claude Killy - Alpine Skier and Olympic Champion**

Why is it that amateur athletes can compete like champions one day, and on the next day champions can compete like amateurs? Pick any sport you like, and you will be able to identify those athletes with a high degree of consistency and consequently success, and those athletes that have incredible natural talent – yet never reach the same levels of achievement. In most sports; training technique, fitness, nutrition, skills development, strength and speed are at a similar level for elite athletes – very little separates the top athletes. Very little on a physical level that is. The differential between champions and potential champions is universally acknowledged as being a mental difference. What is not universally acknowledged is the question of what that difference is, and how do you bridge that gap?

What is mental toughness anyway? What are the components of Big Match Temperament (BMT) and how do you develop them? In this book we looked at these questions from a solutions focus perspective. When athletes are at their very best what are they doing mentally to support that performance? This state of performing at or beyond your potential is often referred to as being, “In the Zone” hence the title of the book, and the focus of our research. By interviewing some of South Africa's top athletes who have experienced being in the zone at some stage of their career, we were able to create a structure of their collective experience which allows us to answer those difficult questions on BMT and mental toughness.

South Africa stood still on the 4th of August 1996, as a lone, unknown athlete ran through the streets of Atlanta. Josiah Thugwane came from nowhere to win a Gold medal in the marathon at the Olympics. A few weeks before Josiah had been shot in the face and had injured his back while being hijacked. His victory was truly a marvel and many South Africans still get emotional when they think of it. That day Josiah Thugwane was “in the Zone.”

We are amazed at the glimpses of the Zone our athletes give us, those days when they seem to rise above a normal performance and do something truly special. Penny Heyns broke 11 world records in 3 months, Ernie Els won the US Open in 1994, and Herschelle Gibbs scored 175 of 111 balls on the way to South Africa scoring 434-9, beating the world record and more importantly beating Australia at the Wanderers.

And so we find ourselves chasing sports Holy Grail. Why can athletes at times produce awesome performances one day and mundane to average performances the next? Is this the best we can hope for, rare glimpses of brilliance? Is this maybe the nature of sport that keeps us coming back? The thought that today could be the day when it all comes together?

We have personally seen young athletes in many sports with raw natural talent way beyond their peers. They are heralded as the next great thing but don't reach near their potential.

Others with much less natural talent but a tremendous drive to succeed hold the coveted trophies aloft. What is the difference?

What happens everyday in the mind of a champion? How does he get up early and put in many long hours in the gym and training? Why does he submit himself to deprivations and pain?

How does he cope with the pressure of international competition where the difference between great or second is in millimetres or microseconds?

These are the questions we set out to answer in this book.

How do you enter the Zone?

Nearly all the athletes and coaches we spoke to thought of the zone as being elusive and something that happens purely by chance. They described the “Zone” as being a time of flow, a time when things seemed easy and you never felt rushed, a place of calm.

We began looking at the process that allows these players to get into the zone. Thought and behaviour are not random but tend to occur in patterns or processes. By repeating a pattern of thought or behaviour it eventually becomes a learned behaviour; sometimes in the form of a habit, and other times in the form of a perceptual filter¹, or thinking style.

We sought to find the patterns that make up the thinking and behaviour when in the zone. We used a process called modelling. Modelling says you don’t need to develop a skill from scratch. There are people out there who are experts in what you want to do. If you can unpack (explore and discover) their thinking processes, you can begin to replicate the behaviour.

And so began our quest to interview the top sportsmen and women in South Africa. Although we have interviewed people from many different sports we were interested to find the common variables. If these athletes had common traits in their experience of the flow state then we could begin building a model for others to use.

What we found has been amazing.

There are certain traits in all these champions which were unique to their flow experiences, with different athletes experiencing these different traits in various degrees. They are champions for a reason. They think and behave like champions. In South Africa most of the athletes we have interviewed have had little training in the psychology of sport and so their mental make-up has been largely self-developed.

What though of the thousands of young sportspeople who don’t have this thinking naturally but who with a little assistance could be helped to develop a champion’s mindset? We could prevent the current situation where our youngsters find it difficult to make the transition from school and youth sport to the senior, professional arena.

This book could be equally valuable for those semi-professional and professional athletes who have found their form inconsistent or waning or their careers have plateaued. Some

¹ Perceptual filters are known as Meta Programs in Neuro-Semantics. Meta Programs are the thinking and perceiving filters that people unconsciously utilize to process information in different contexts. Meta Programs are explored in more depth in later chapters.

athletes are labelled as “chokers” and despite their best efforts they cannot peak when the pressure moments arrive others just have nowhere to turn when they intuitively know they can perform at a higher level, but just don’t know the steps to take to make that happen.

This is the realm that we (the authors) operate in. We coach executives and athletes to attain a higher level of performance or self actualisation by using a questioning process that unleashes an individual’s growth, personal and professional development and supports them in achieving their outcomes. We have found that by using a model such as a leadership model or an elite athlete’s high performance model we have a useful frame of reference to create the awareness in the athlete that informs them when choosing their outcomes.

There will never be a one-size fits all solution for everyone, people are too unique and multi-dimensional for that. What we are proposing is that there is a common mental foundational basis for high performance sport, and when athletes are looking to actualise their potential these fundamental skills should be their first starting point. Once the fundamental skills are in place the next tier of skills will be wholly dependant on what is relevant for the athlete: this is the traditional domain of life coaching

So to be able to enter into the “zone” regularly several things are needed. Firstly a strong foundation. These are the skills as discussed in the book such as having a strong work ethic being internally referent, differentiating between confidence and esteem, being resilient, and understanding and performing with ones highest intentions, managing anxiety and confidence, quality mental preparation, meta-detailing, engaging in meaningful and high quality practise and being un-insultable coupled with being an active identity shaper.

The majority of the athletes interviewed in this book developed their mental skills, for want of a better word, “naturally” over a period of time. These athletes had various levels of self awareness such that some found it incredibly interesting and illuminating to explore and examine their mental skills whereas others felt that they had discovered very little about themselves through the interview process. We found that the athletes with the higher levels of self awareness had strategies that they could implement to find their way back to form, in a shorter space of time, by investing time in meaningful practice; in essence they practiced through their waning form.

In some ways an elite athlete is like an amateur music appreciator put in charge of conducting an orchestra. If each instrument represents a mental skill, together they combine to create the music that leads to on-field performance. The conductor in this metaphor will usually be able to sense if the music is noticeably out of key, even with his untrained ear. The more self-aware conductors know that through repetition of practise and given enough time, eventually the music will come right (hopefully in time for the day of the big performance).

The advantage of training the ear of the conductor, or improving the mental awareness of our athletes is that given time they will be able to pick out each instrument in their mental orchestra, and be able to isolate in a short space of time where the attention is needed and what is needed to get things back on song, on an individual skills level basis. This allows for shorter time to fine tune form and a higher level of success in managing on field performance peaks and troughs.

Once mental awareness is developed an athlete can then begin the process of developing his mental skills or to further extend the metaphor, upgrade the instruments in their orchestra.

This is a specialist process that requires a deep understanding of how the mind works, and what models are needed to develop targeted self growth and behavioural shifts within the athlete. The psychology and technology behind the zone is explored in a later chapter.

The quality of sound a musical instrument can produce is limited by the quality of its materials and construction. A \$1 000000 Stradivarius violin will produce dramatically different output to that of a cheap hand-me-down violin that was poorly constructed and poorly cared for. The quality of an orchestra's output will always be limited by its weakest instrument.

The physical skill of playing the instruments in the orchestra can be likened to the elite athlete's fitness, nutrition, skills development, strength and speed levels. The reason why these are not mentioned specifically in the metaphor is that for elite athletes, these attributes are typically at a relatively similar level.

Many athletes have erratic form because they don't perform with a full orchestra!

Many athletes may stumble into developing some or all of these skills over the course of their careers, this process being a largely hit and miss affair which results in potentially many wasted seasons or years before athletes begin to perform to their potential, provided that they are fortunate enough to naturally develop these skills at a deep level. The reason for this is twofold, up until now these skills haven't been modelled out before in their entirety and secondly the newness of the mental coaching profession; many of the models and techniques used to model out the skills, as well as the coaching models used to mentally coach athletes have only been developed in the mid 1990's and early 2000's.

This book is designed to be read on two levels. Firstly it is the stories of our heroes, the people we love or hate, with a glimpse into their lives and thinking. Secondly it is an examination of the structure, the underlying beliefs and thinking that contribute to their genius. It is a textbook for those who would like to examine their own mental makeup. It provides a recipe of techniques to try and experiment with. Hopefully it will prove to be a model to build the sports heroes of the future. For it is in that moment in the zone, when a human being performs away and above himself that we are all as spectators, stirred and roused to believe in the ability of man to transcend himself.

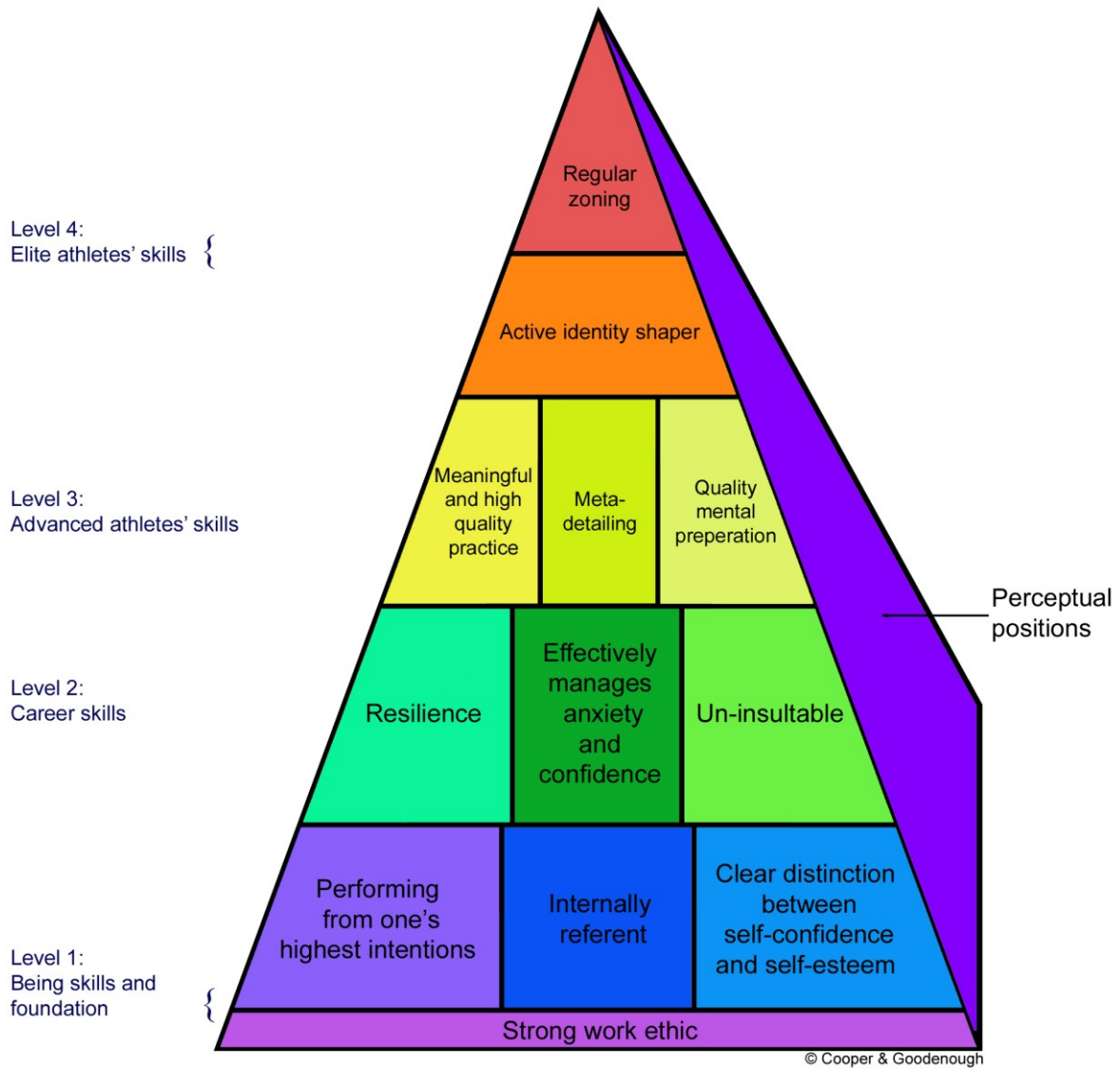
We have been asked the question of how many of the skills we explore in this book are the foundation of excellence, and not just sporting excellence. We have added a chapter to the book to explore this particular theme, and may focus the next, "In the Zone" book on entrepreneurs or leaders. That being said, we have a sense that most of the skills will be foundational skills in any domain where excellence is sought – and we are looking forward to examining the subject further.

There are many South Africa sports heroes we would have liked to interview for this book; the athletes interviewed are by no means the only South Africa sports heroes who have represented our country with pride.

We have based the book on our training as life coaches. We would like to acknowledge two awesome trainers and developers in the world of human performance. Firstly Dr L.Michael Hall who is the founder of the field of Neuro-semantic which gives us a road map to understanding human thinking and development. His models are the cutting edge of personal

development. The patterns (exercises) described in this book, unless indicated otherwise come from or are adapted from L. Michael Hall, Ph.D. who developed the Meta-States model. Patterns used here can be found in *Sourcebook of Magic, Volumes I and II, User's Manual of the Brain, Volumes I and II* along with other books that we have referenced. His partner Michelle Duval is an Australian life Coach whose methods of coaching and understanding people has led to the Meta-Coach system. We believe all coaches in sport should be trained in this way. We would also like to acknowledge Anne Renew and Cheryl Lucas who brought this training methodology into South Africa and brought it to our attention.

The Zoning Pyramid



By placing the zoning skills in a pyramid we are aiming to demonstrate how the skills are interrelated. When we started our research it was all about “zoning,” the top of the pyramid. How does an athlete get there? As we interviewed more athletes we began to realise that although being in the zone might only last 9.8 seconds as an example in a 100 metre race, the ability to zone at such an important moment required a lot more mental development than we had first imagined, in fact a total of 11 other skills were required for that level of performance. Due to the way these skills often combine to create other benefits, it was important to understand where to start developing skills, and how the skills are related to each other.

Some skills you would find difficult to fully develop if some of the lower skills were not in place.

And so we designed a pyramid where each level rests on those below. To reach the top you need to climb the lower levels.

Level 1: Being skills and foundation

The first layer of the pyramid is work ethic. Nothing happens unless you work smart and hard in the sports world. It is the foundation as every other skill takes effort and commitment to build and apply.

In the book we describe Performing from one’s highest intentions as skill 1 yet in the diagram, Strong Work Ethic underpins everything. The reason for the ordering is that whilst a strong work ethic is the most critical skill, it is from the performing from ones highest intentions skill that athletes get their motivation and energy to drive their strong work ethic and the development and use of the other skills in the pyramid.

We debated a lot about whether the being skills should be at the bottom of the pyramid alongside the strong work ethic skill, but after reviewing all our interviews again it was clear having a strong work ethic is the cornerstone of every other skill. You may have fantastic mental skills, but unless you do anything with them, they will not support high performance.

These skills are interesting as they are not just foundational skills for elite athletes but are foundational skills for every person who wants to succeed in life. We have found in our executive coaching practices that these four skills are also there in highly successful business men and women.

The being skills are at the bottom of the pyramid, and once they are in place, the doing skills have a strong foundation to develop from.

Level 2: Career Skills

The next three mental skills are more specific for athletes. They will distinguish your committed athlete from the weekend sportsmen. But they take effort and work to practice till they are mastered.

Level 3: Advanced athletes skills

Athletes who have developed skills at this level will typically be above average performers.

Advanced athletes require an incredible amount of discipline and effort, the challenge for athletes at this level is to make this type of total personal commitment and sacrifice that is required.

Level 4: Elite athlete's skills

Now the athlete can congruently and believably create an identity for themselves as an elite athlete and champion. Some never make the jump from level 3 to 4 where they can truly in their hearts see themselves as world beaters and champions. An athlete doesn't need to have a world ranking as No 1 or even needed to have won the world championship to have this identity; he just needs to be No 1 in his own mind.

With all these levels in place the athlete can create a space for himself where he can zone regularly and at will.

Perceptual Positions

This is the other side of the pyramid. It is not a skill everyone will have to develop but anyone who plays in an individual sport or is a decision maker in a team will need it to be truly effective. In fact if you fall into this category and don't have this skill it will stop you being able to perform optimally.

Chapter 28

John-Laffnie de Jager

“If you don’t know what works for you, you will never make it. You need to be in tune with what your body can do” –JL De Jager

John-Laffnie De Jager was born in Johannesburg and went to Ermelo High School. JL was a very good junior singles and doubles player. He won the US Open Junior doubles title, with Karim Alami in 1991. He turned professional a year later in 1992. He was a semi-finalist at the 2000 Sydney Olympics and in 2005 he was appointed the captain of the South African Davis cup tennis team. JL has won numerous doubles titles around the world as well being finalists at the French Open and Australian Open mixed doubles titles. JL has played team tennis several times with the likes of Martin Navratilova, Jimmy Connors and Monica Seles. At the height of his career JL was ranked 4th in the world in Doubles Tennis with David Adams.

John Laffnie De Jager’s career as a sportsman very nearly didn’t happen at all. When he was born his mother’s heart stopped, causing JL’s heart to stop as well. He needed an injection to be revived, and unfortunately whilst the injection is meant to be inserted into the thigh, this injection went into his gluteus maximus muscle (bum) and hit a major nerve resulting in paralysis of his left leg – a condition sometimes referred to as a drop leg.

JL had no ability to move his toes or lift his foot. His foot was in a cast for the first three years of his life. Even now JL has limited ability to move his toes and very little power in his left leg, his little toe on his left leg has no feeling. JL adapted the way he walked by swinging his toe around and had to adapt the way he ran as well. Doctors told him he had a 12 % chance of walking properly and definitely no chance of playing sport, they told his parents he had to wear special shoes to support his leg until the age of 18, where he would have an operation that would helpfully allow him to walk without support. Walking barefoot was strictly forbidden.

JL’s parents listened very carefully to what the Doctors had to say and then chose to do what they felt was right. They embarked on a physically and emotionally demanding intensive rehabilitation program where they massaged JL’s leg and supported him exercising daily during his early years. Perhaps equally importantly to this massive commitment they shared their belief with their son that just because the doctor said something, doesn’t necessarily mean that it was true.

JL also chose not to listen to the doctors. By walking barefoot it made his foot more flexible, but because of the difference in leg length (His right leg was 1 1/2 inches shorter than his left leg) JL damaged his back.

Soon after JL started playing sports he realized how much he loved it and so he took his chance and ran with it. His disability meant that he had to work twice as hard as other athletes to get to the same level but if anything this challenge further entrenched his determination, this was a logical step as all through his formative years his parents had created an environment where determination and self-belief flourished.

At school JL played as much sport as possible. JL played Craven Week (Junior provincial) rugby, participated fully in athletics, and achieved provincial colors in both cricket and tennis. When reflecting back to his early days JL refers to sport as having “saved him” but unfortunately at the cost of a damaged back.

JL learned from his parents that in life the small things make the difference. JL is very detailed orientated. He has a strong sense of structure in his life, he doesn't like chaos. He has a strong preference for the detail and procedure Meta-Programs.

JL plays tennis for the challenge. “Challenge is my weakness” Don't tell me I can't do something, because I will do everything I can to do that.

In High School JL's tennis career began to take off, he played so much tennis that when he was in Standard 6 (Grade 8) he missed 21 weeks of school, the following year he missed even more school – he was off for 24 weeks.

Eventually the pressure got to JL and so he told his Dad that he wanted to leave school, as he could no longer take touring and studying. His parents agreed to the idea of him leaving school with the condition that he still got his matric (final year of school qualification).

And so JL went to the inspector of education and asked for permission to leave school when he turned 16, which was contrary to departmental regulations (as usually a 16 year old can only leave school at the end of the schooling year that he turned 16 in). When questioned about his plans to study, and how many subjects he would take over what period of time JL proclaimed that he would do all 6 outstanding matric subjects in one year. The Inspector said there was, “no chance in hell” that he could do 6 subjects, and with that response the challenge was sealed, no-one tells JL what he can't do. When he shared the conversation with his father he thought his dad was going to be mad, and apologized to him for being “windgat”(hardheaded) His dad replied it was good, because he believed in his own ability and so he was going to do it.

For the next six months he was on tour and studying part time. He didn't go to movies or out with his friends. Whenever he went to practice he would spend an hour studying at the courts. He took his study materials with him everywhere. He was dedicated, it was a challenge. 6 months after leaving school, JL wrote matric with 6 subjects and passed everything

During that tough period of touring and playing JL's dad reminded him that he only had a few months left of school, and then it was over for good. The way he was brought up made a big difference for him – he learnt to work hard, and to never give up. He wanted to give himself the best opportunity every day to perform, he knew that if he was to do that he needed to have a great attitude.

JL felt he had a two year bonus, having got his matric at 16. He then went to compulsory military service, but was lucky that he could still play tennis whilst in the military. After finishing his compulsory service, he joined the professional tennis tour.

As an 18 year old JL played world team tennis with Martina Navratilova, and during that tournament he met Martina Navratilova's podiatrist. After seeing JL move on the tennis court, Martina's doctor suggested a consultation and soon for the first time in his career JL

had inner soles for his tennis shoes. The previous year JL went over his ankle 6 times, and the inner soles for the first time stabilized JL's back

The experience of going through all the challenges with his leg gave JL the belief that he has a second chance at life, so every time he played sport, "It was a bonus" He believes you shouldn't play unless you are going to give 100 %, if you give 80 %, you should rather give someone else the opportunity so he can give 100%. This is still one of the most frustrating things for him; watching tennis players who don't put 100% in.

Here credit must go to both JL and his parents. For many the event of leg paralysis due to doctor error would lead to an anger and blame filled young man. The reverse is true for the De Jagers. Instead JL calls it a defining moment that shaped him and allowed him to appreciate every second of his second chance. He feels that every moment after his heart stopped at birth is extra, even if it meant dealing with partial paralysis.

Due to his shortened leg, JL's tennis court speed was slow, so he had to develop and learn "shortcuts" to help him stay competitive, that's why he only played singles until he was 19. He was ranked 180 when he went to Moscow in 1992 with Christo van Rensburg, Marius Barnard and Brent Haygard; the team won the tournament and his ranking went to 125.

The following year JL entered the Australian Open doubles competition, and during his first round match when he was 4-4 in the 3rd set he went for an overhead and coming down he went over his ankle. The therapist raced onto the court and after some consultation, and strapping, JL could hardly walk. Instead of forfeiting the match like most others would do, he made his natural choice and chose not to give up. He always felt that even if he was hopping, the other player could break his leg and they would win. JL and Marcus Ondruska ending up winning that set 8-6, and with it the match.

After the game JL went home and got treatment, packed his bags, and booked a flight out of Australia for the next day, he felt that because he could hardly walk his tournament was over. The next morning he went down to the court to see what the doctor had to say, taking with him his entire luggage for his impending departure. After a consultation with the Doctor and his doubles partner, he decided to "give it a go" and although his movement was severely limited and in his own words he "just swung from the hips" JL and Marcus managed to beat the No 2 seeds in the tournament and ending up making it all the way to the semi-final.

The tournament provided further challenges for JL, in the quarter finals he and Marcus were up 2 sets to 1 and up a break at 30/15, and as he went up for an overhead, JL came down and went over his ankle again. JL experienced incredible pain shooting through his leg, but he refused to give up and refused to drop his doubles partner. He finished the game hobbling at the net, winning the next two points which gave the doubles pair a semi final.

JL's highest intentions of having a second chance in life and his determination to take his chance are clearly evidenced in his behaviour. The fierce determination to never give up is the most consistent and obvious example of a man who is absolutely connected with the meaning his sport has for him every time he walked onto a tennis court.

One of JL's other strengths was that he grew to be in touch with the physical limitations and abilities of his body. During the early parts of his career JL never used to have an off season as he was worried about how the opposition players were doing, he thought they were

probably training and getting better, so he had to as well. Through experience JL adapted his training strategy, due to the nature of his disability if JL trained for 3 straight hours his ability to perform at an optimum level suffered for the next 2 days. A lot of players have 2 ½ hours training in the morning, 2 ½ hours training in the afternoon and gym for 2 hours. JL used to train like this, and eventually he learnt that to get the best out of his body he needed to train for 2 ½ hours in the morning, followed by 1 ½ - 2 hours in the gym and no other physical exertion.

On the court JL would aim to dictate to his opponents and force his opponents to play the way he wanted them to play. He would know his opponents strengths and weaknesses. To do this JL needed to believe he had all the shots in the book, and have many game plans that he could call on successfully. JL practiced to make sure that he had as complete a game as possible.

In practice he would limit himself to playing certain game plans, and shots to improve their quality regardless of the quality of the opposition. In this way he would challenge himself in practice and create multiple game plans that he could execute. This also gave him extra confidence as he was prepared for every and any eventuality on the court, even an injury that would force him to change his playing style; for example moving from a double handed backhand to a single handed backhand slice.

“When I practice I make it very tough for myself, because when you are out there in a match, 90 % of the time you are out of your comfort zone.” To discover his weakness he would run scenarios in his mind as if he was going to play against himself the next day – what would his game plan be?

95 % of all of JL’s practice would end on a high point, to practice his returns which was his strength in his game, that extra focused practice meant that by the time the key point came in a game, not only did JL have a finely honed skill but he also had the confidence in his skill, “I know I can hit a great return”, if he hadn’t practiced so much he might have been thinking, “I hope I can hit a good return.”

JL says that the best servers in the world have one ball toss, and from there can serve every serve. However the rest have different ball tosses that result in different serves, so he would watch this as a clue to where he should move for the serve. Before the serve was hit he would decide where he was going to hit his return, for example if the ball was to his forehand he would go up the line, and if it was to his backhand he would go cross court.

This led to JL’s mental strategy for big points, in his mind he would edge on his opponent to give him his best serve, as he knew that he had a quality return for it. This meant he was never surprised or intimidated by the serve, and was able to produce great returns. He wanted to beat his opponents when they were playing their best tennis. JL believed that by not having surprises on a tennis court he cut out a contributing factor to some of the mistakes other tennis players made. In tennis you need variety; you need to be able to adapt to play the game in different ways. He focused on the little things to give him the edge, like watching an opponent’s ball toss, to see where he was going to serve.

JL traveled with Christo Van Rensburg as an 18 year old; At the time Christo was 19 in the world and No 1 in South Africa. As an 18 year old at Wimbledon JL was down as he couldn’t find a doubles partner as the people he normally played with weren’t available and he felt that

no one else wanted to play with him. JL was good friends with Elna Reinch the No 1 women's tennis player in SA; her sister was married to Christo Van Rensburg and he was sitting at Wimbledon without a doubles partner, Elna suggested he ask Christo and JL replied, "I can't ask him, he's too good" Elna dragged him to Christo, and said "JL has a question for you" Christo accepted the invitation.

JL played two more tournaments with Christo, won one and made the finals of the other. That's where JL got his break, and that's where he learnt, "You ask"; the worst that can happen is that people say no. Christo taught JL a lot of things, including never giving up, "you work hard, you train your butt off". Christo wasn't as outrageously talented as some of his contemporaries but due to his work ethic he was able to have a much more successful career than many of them. JL believes that today in professional sport talent doesn't open the door for you anymore; someone with less talent and better work ethic will get further and stay there longer.

JL believes a talented guy who works hard becomes a super star, e.g. Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods. For example Steve Redgrave used to practice twice a day, and on Christmas day used to practice 4 times on that day, as he knew he was two practices ahead of everybody.

Patrick Rafter, Thomas Muster, Ivan Lendl – are all examples of tennis players who did not have as much talent as some of the other ATP tour pros, but due to their epic work ethic they became very successful, and when they got to the top they stayed there for long periods

JL believes a very important aspect for successful athletes is that they believe in their own ability. You need to believe you are the best to make it. This involves athletes stepping up to the plate when the chips are down. JL plays sport to compete, so when the chips are down, you have to produce, else why do it? It should be the same if there are 20 000 people watching or 2. If the stakes are down you must produce. You need to relish taking a game winning opportunity.

When JL plays tennis he says he is not playing against his opponent, he is playing against the tennis ball. If he focuses too much on his opponent he is forgetting what he has to do.

JL could compartmentalize a mistake or a series of poor shots as just being that, and not have any meaning for the game other than that he needed to check his checkpoints.

JL had checkpoints for each core component of his game, that he could refer back to as being the fundamentals of that shot, e.g., What is he doing when he has a great forehand, what is he doing when he has a great serve. This meant that JL never panicked on court, as he knew he had the answers, he just had to apply himself correctly.

Examples of check points for a forehand

- 1) Are my elbows away from my body?
- 2) Am I stepping towards the ball with my left foot?
- 3) Is my racquet head up?
- 4) Is my wrist up?

Contrary to what we expected when JL is playing he didn't have any internal dialogue reminding him of his checkpoints. He says he has repeated the process so many times his

body feels that it is natural, and he just uses the checkpoints as a fail safe in case things are not going the way he wants. He only goes through his checklist between points or at the break, never while playing.

JL has a turn-drop-swing movement that he focused on for every shot, he used to practice this in the mirror until it became second nature. JL is a very visual athlete, so he needs to see something shown to him to be able to use it.

JL says that some tennis players have great games and then have one area they are struggling with, they then focus so much on that one area that other areas of their game begin to suffer as they are not fully focused on the basics. In changeovers JL had a ritual that he always tried to follow when he sat down, it helped centre himself and take his mind off of any distractions.

When moving on the tennis court, JL can't move with his left foot first (due to his drop leg), he has to split step then move forward. If JL took a split step then took another step and then tried to move forward he struggled

JL struggled against opponents that chipped as he wasn't a great mover. He says fortunately for him with his era of tennis players, the finesse was going out, and the power game was coming in which suited him perfectly. Those players who chipped and lobbed he struggled against e.g. Cyril Suk, Tom Niessen, John McEnroe and Fabrice (the magician) Santoro.

His opponents quickly learnt that JL wasn't great at overheads, fortunately JL's doubles partner was very quick, so they devised a system where JL dominated up front and anything that went up was his partners.

JL and his partner adjusted their game plan and strategy when one of their opponents identified one of their weaknesses. JL believes you need to be able to adapt to situations all the time, and that is why the way you practice is so important. The way you practice, is the way you want to play a match.

Tennis is different to most other sports in that to win a tournament you have to string together many consecutive days of high quality play. What makes this especially challenging is that the break between matches is very small. With rugby there is a week to both physically and mentally recover between games, with tennis you play for a full week, with perhaps one day off.

During a tournament, you would look at the draw, develop a game plan for each game, and then regroup after every game. You have to be sharp every day. You need to be able to turn it on every day for a tournament. You need to be able to adjust your game, you can't be frustrated when the opposition identifies your weakness, you have to adapt.

The challenge for today's players is that many don't know themselves, because of this they aren't flexible enough to force the opposition to play to their strengths. JL believes at the elite level of tennis all the players know each others weaknesses, and it is just a matter of who can dominate the game to force the opposition to play their weaker game.

“Growing up I won a lot of Wimbledon finals in my head “, this meant the first time JL walked onto Wimbledon centre court he wasn’t overwhelmed, as he felt he had been there before.

His visualizations were from the 1st person; he never heard the smack of the ball on the racquet whilst playing; it was dead silent whilst he was playing and he only heard the roar of the crowd once the point was won. During his visualizations he had a sense of the feeling of how the ball came off the racquet.

Because of his leg injury JL needed to create short cuts, one of those short cuts was being able to size up opponents quickly. He used to watch matches to get a feel for his opposition; he had a book where he wrote down their preferred shots, and shots they played when they were under pressure. This normally helped unless the opponent did his homework as well.

JL knew that with his disability if he was able to make it, he would have a significant impact on others peoples lives. This combined with challenge and his belief in his own second chance was a potent combination of higher intentions. “If I can do this, what can you do?” JL gets frustrated with talented athletes who are lazy, as they won’t achieve their potential. On the tour a professional player is their own boss, if they don’t want to train, they won’t, but they mustn’t expect to win. Discipline is a key to achieving success.

JL had a rule that if he played badly he could sulk until the sun came up, then it was a new day, “If I lose my cool in a game, it wont help me win the game.”

The very first... and only time JL threw his racquet as a youngest he turned around to see his Dad with his bag over his shoulder, telling him it was time to leave. He said if you get frustrated don’t throw your racquet, but once a match you can scream as loud as you want to, so that you can get it out of your system and then you are ready to play.

So when he played and he got frustrated, he would scream and get it out of his system, but then he knew his one chance to scream was gone... now he had to play. He credits his parents as playing a huge role in his development, he believes many parents these days allow their kids to give up when the going gets rough, instead of supporting their child to fight harder.

An hour before JL played he started with his pre-match routine, so he was never rushed. His warm up period included having his ankles taped, stretching and then being calm for the 10 minutes before the match. During the entire warm up period he was thinking of the match, he was warming up physically and mentally. JL used to visualize every serve of his first serving game, how he was going to hit the ball and where he was going to place it. JL always tried to return first in a game, so he could hit a few balls to get the nerves out of his system. He believes you need to have some nerves to compete at the highest level.

If a player believes in his own ability he safeguards himself against forming an unhealthy relationship with his coach. The tennis coach is just for what happens in the four lines, and cant help with anything else out there. The coach mustn’t B.S. his player. For a good coach it is about the player.

JL has a metaphor that he uses when playing tennis, he sees himself as a castle that needs soldiers to protect it. Every time he berates himself he shoots 10 soldiers, you need to build

yourself up and be positive and that will give you that edge that you need. He also asks his kids to think how Federer will handle something when they are in a tough situation

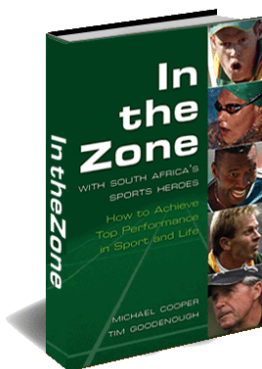
People used to say to JL “What would it have been like if you didn’t have problems with your leg? You would have been a great.” JL replies that maybe, maybe not, there is a chance that he would have been lazy (slapgat) if he didn’t have to work so hard to achieve success and wouldn’t have achieved much at all.

JL knew that because of his leg he had to work twice as hard, and because he worked twice as hard he knew he could do it. When things get tough he knew he had worked hard enough to be successful.

JL was taught growing up you should never think you are better than anyone else; you must be able to talk and deal with everybody. This taught JL flexibility which allowed him to thrive when touring, even though he was in different countries, with different food, and different cultures. JL was also taught by his parents that when things go wrong, the first person you look to is yourself.

We were hugely impressed by JL. He is an incredible athlete and has one of the most well developed mental strategies we have ever encountered. He is very passionate about developing tennis in South Africa and he is a great ambassador for the game.

If you are interested in reading more of this book you can order online at



<http://www.kalahari.net/bk/product.asp?sku=30626164>

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