## Contents

Foreword by Mark Nesti ........................................... vi
Preface ................................................................... ix
Acknowledgements ................................................ xii

**Introduction** .......................................................... 1

1 **Experiencing peak performance** ................................ 9
2 **Your mind is like a Formula One car** ......................... 21
3 **Razor sharp focus** ............................................... 31
4 **Control your confidence** ....................................... 49
5 **Master motivation** ................................................ 63
6 **Deconstructing pressure** ....................................... 77
7 **Love your discomfort zone** ..................................... 93
8 **Release the hand brake!** ........................................ 109
9 **Avoid the trapdoors** ............................................. 125
10 **Habits of great performers** .................................... 139
11 **Coaching others to achieve peak performances** ........ 157

Theoretical background and further reading .................. 171
Bibliography ............................................................. 188
Index ......................................................................... 201
A while ago I did some work with a very prestigious private bank in the UK. I worked with a group of senior partners on how to maximize their personal performance and the performance of the people around them. During one of the sessions I was asked: ‘So, which is most important then, confidence, motivation or focus?’ To be honest I’d never been asked the question before so I had to stop and think for a minute. My brain tends to work in pictures and images. The image that entered my mind was a Formula One (F1) car. I started to realize that there are many key components in the car, all of which depend on each other. Having one on its own will not win you the race. Gradually, I started to explain how confidence, motivation and focus fit together, using the F1 car as an analogy.

Imagine the F1 car. It has an incredibly powerful and finely tuned engine. It’s perfectly obvious to most of us that in order to produce the immense speeds required to win a race you need a powerful engine. However, a powerful engine alone will not win the race. A Dragster has a powerful engine, but it would not win the Monaco Grand Prix. Power is not the only quality that the car needs to possess. In order to win a race, our F1 car also requires manoeuvrability. Formula One races are not run on straight tracks. The cars need to have a state-of-the-art steering system in order to successfully navigate the course at high speed.
As we all know, even these two components are not enough to win. In fact, even if we went through every nut and bolt in the car we would still not find all the components required. In order to win a race, we need elements that lie outside the body of the car as well. Probably the most obvious is the driver. Arguably the driver is one of the most vital factors in the success of our F1 car. If we had the best engine on earth, the number one steering system and the finest nuts and bolts money could buy, we won’t win the race with a timid driver who gets scared driving over 30 mph.

All this talk of F1 cars is all well and good, but how does it relate to our trio of confidence, motivation and focus? This is the way I see it:

- Motivation is the engine. It is sometimes known as ‘drive’. It will provide us with the power and energy that we need.
- Focus is our steering system. Motivation alone is not enough. If our motivation is undirected, we won’t achieve our goals. It is very easy to be a motivated, energetic fool who runs around doing all sorts of wonderful things that never produce an outcome. I have to say I’ve been guilty of that a few times myself.
- Confidence is our driver. Will the driver push himself and the car to the limits of its capacity, or back off a little at the crucial moments? Will the driver have enough confidence in the game plan to bide his time and only strike at exactly the right moment, or will he force a move that isn’t there and spin off? Can the driver hold his nerve at crucial points in the race, or will he crack?

Maybe that’s a long-winded way of saying you need all three. However, I think it’s more than that. It shows that in reality they are dependent on each other – there is an
interaction between the three components. In reality they all impact on each other. If they were colours, they would merge together as a spectrum rather than being individual blobs on a page.

If we look at the relationship between the three more closely, it’s actually possible to see how they affect each other. When we have a simple, clear job, we have a very good chance of doing that job well (Donnelly and Ivancevich, 1975; Baumeister and Showers, 1986). Obviously, we need to have the knowledge, skills, resources and desire to do it as well. But, having a simple, clear task initially gives us a massive advantage. Evidence for this concept comes from a variety of sources. Researchers in management settings have identified that both task clarity (Lindsley et al., 1995) and role clarity (Bray and Brawley, 2002a, 2002b) have a significant impact on performance. When we understand the job, we’re able to do it well. When we do the job well, we normally get a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. Typically, as human beings, we like exhibiting mastery and we like to be successful in the things we do. So, when we perform well at something, we tend to want to do it again (Kloosterman, 1988). Psychologists such as Albert Bandura (1997) have identified strong links between mastery, confidence, achievement and motivation. These links set up our positive spiral:

- When I’m focused on a simple, clear job, I give myself the best chance of being successful.
- When I have done the job well I become confident and enjoy doing it.
- When I am confident in doing something, I am motivated to do it again.

These statements may seem perfectly obvious, but I do think that their significance is often over-looked. I’ve seen some very well-qualified managers who haven’t recognized
how important these fundamental principles are. They wonder why they have members of the team who seem unmotivated, but they don’t look for the reasons why. If someone is not confident in their ability to do the job well, they might well shy away from it. Think about those tasks that you always seem to put off. Do they tend to be tasks that you’d consider easy and straightforward? Are they tasks that you’re confident in, or are they the ones you’re not sure about? Do they tend to be the tasks you are familiar with, or the ones you’d describe as more difficult or tricky?

The positive spiral that we’ve described also shows us how we can turn around under-performance or deteriorating performance (such as the one we looked at in the Introduction). It tells us that focus is often the best starting point. Most people would probably think that a lack of confidence might best be addressed head on. I have seen many football managers and coaches who believe that a pep talk is a good solution to a team’s lack of confidence. I guess many people believe that giving someone a pep talk or increasing the amount of positive feedback they receive will help to boost their confidence. Equally, many people would probably think that an inspirational speech or a set of attractive incentives would boost motivation, but in reality they don’t often have that effect. It does work in the movies – those famous speeches in films such as Independence Day and Any Given Sunday are iconic. However, in my experience, it doesn’t often work the same way in practice and rarely has a significant and sustained effect on performance. In fact, research on performance spirals also indicates that verbal encouragement is not often enough to increase confidence or turn around a deteriorating performance (Lindsley et al., 1995).

I’d always start by trying to simplify the job. Cut out the complexity and start with a straightforward task that is entirely under the control of the performer (Horn, 2008).
a team environment, this means that everyone needs to have a simple job. They have to know what they need to do and how to do it. As a coach or manager, that is arguably our first job (Key, 2006). We will look at each of the three components in much more detail in the following chapters. For now, it’s important to understand how they interact and relate to each other.

Here is an example from an equestrian rider I worked with recently:

It was lovely to meet you on Tuesday. We actually covered a lot of ground in just one hour. We started the session talking about your riding history. You said you’ve been riding since you were 6 and competing since about the age of 15. Interestingly, you described yourself as competing ‘properly’ since 2005 when you joined the team for the first time. It sounds like the journey has been a little up and down over the last few years because your original horse was injured in 2006. During the last few years, you have been really focused on getting back to where you were in 2005.

It’s 2 weeks until the competition, which is obviously your big focus at the moment. It’s probably fair to say that it is not just a big focus because it’s in 2 weeks’ time. In reality it represents your big ambition in the sport at this point and has been a focus for years. We discussed how you’re feeling about it right now. Your words were ‘scared, nervous and worried’. You also talked about the ‘pressure of competing for this team in this competition’. We spent quite a while chatting about where this stems from. You talked about missing the opportunity in 2006 and not being ready in 2007. You also talked about the time and money invested into training and competition. You mentioned the pressure that you have perceived when competing for the team because there are people watching, etc. They are all
common reasons why people feel nervous before events. In reality, what people do is they tend to attach a lot of meaning to an event, which acts as baggage and forms an agenda that is not really there.

As we continued to chat, we started to become aware of the even bigger issues that have been playing out. You mentioned that typically you have not been confident in yourself. This has manifested in your work and life. If we’re not confident in life, we tend to pin all of our self-evaluation on the results we get from sport. In a sense, we look to our sporting success or failure to tell us how good we are at life. In this situation we rely on good results for our self-acceptance and therefore place massive pressure on the performance.

As I said, I believe that there is no such thing as pressure. It is created by our imagination. It has to be imaginary because it is a future event. The only place it can exist is our imagination. The fact is that because we create it, we can also get rid of it!

Ultimately, you will feel less pressure to perform in competition when you start to see it for what it really is – just you, the horse and some fences. The job is actually pretty simple when you look at it – jump over as many fences as you can as quickly as you can. If it starts to become more than that, we get into problems. The reality is that the job doesn’t change just because it’s a major competition. It wouldn’t change if we put it into an arena with 100 TV cameras and called it an Olympic final or if it was a training session in your own paddock.

We talked about how you can build your confidence and become happy competing. As you said, priority number 1 is to have fun and enjoy it – that’s the whole point in riding!! We also talked about how your performance is dependent upon your focus. If you are thinking ‘I hope I don’t hit the fence’, then you’re more
likely to hit it. If you are thinking ‘don’t think about the blue pen’, then your mind is fixed on the blue pen. The only way to turn this around is to start focusing on the things that will help you perform. As we chatted about it, you mentioned that focusing on the sound of the horses’ hooves would be effective. If you can really immerse yourself in that sort of focus, your performance will start to take care of itself.

You also know that you can perform well. You have performed well recently (within the last couple of weeks) and cleared fences that you probably wouldn’t have imagined you could clear. Your confidence is built upon evidence. Evidence tells you that you can clear the fences because you do it in training. If you can make training as challenging as competition, you will find it easier to see competition in the same way that you see training. Train like you compete and compete like you train!

In order to start turning their performance around, most people need a very simple starting point. They may see their task as bewildering, maybe even impossible. This is normally a result of getting the job wrong in the first place. We will explore this in much greater detail in Chapter 3. Simply understanding that our clarity of focus often underpins our confidence is the starting point and understanding that our confidence often underpins our motivation is the next stage.

Here is another example from a martial artist who was frustrated by his recent slump in form:

In order to help you to break the pattern that you are in, I asked you about the mental baggage that you’re carrying at the moment. We started this by talking about why it is important to win. You said that winning was important because it tells you that you’ve done what you’re capable of. This is important because you
know that your training is coming together and you’re heading in the right direction. I asked what the right direction is. You said ‘becoming the British Champ’. I also asked why it’s important to become the British Champ. You said that it proves to yourself and everyone else that you can do it. We started to talk about ‘everyone else’. You started to tell me about your mates and the blokes at the gym. You also said that until you were 22 you were bullied and that being a martial arts champion would help you to counter that.

The problem is that it creates false pressure. It acts like a sack of bricks on your back, weighing you down. It clutters your mind and creates too much ‘noise’. It stops you from doing the very, very simple job – fighting the best fight you can.

Fighting the best fight you can on the day is your only job. The job is not to win. It is not to qualify for anything. It is not to impress anyone or make anyone else happy or proud. Stick to a very simple, clear focus. We chatted briefly about the best point of focus for you. I asked you ‘what is the single most important thing you need to focus on when you’re fighting?’. You said – ‘watch the opponent’s eyes’.

Keep it simple, watch the opponent’s eyes and let your instinct and skills do the rest.

These principles don’t just apply to sports. They apply equally to any other walk of life. Here is an example from the first session of an Executive Coaching programme with the leader of a high profile business, who was frustrated because he was working a huge number of hours but struggling to move the business forward at the pace he desired:

You mentioned that although you know you should focus your attentions, you are easily distracted. It seems that
the primary source of the distraction is the people around you. The dichotomy is that you want to be accessible and yet you need to focus. You know that it’s important to be responsive to people so that they feel valued.

You obviously have a huge personal investment in the business and an emotional tie. The business really does matter to you. As a result, it sounds like you wear your heart on your sleeve to a certain extent. You have deliberately sought to create a culture that is built on honesty, authenticity and transparency. The flip side of the coin is that people see when you’re up and down, and it also has an impact on them.

I asked the question ‘if you had a magic wand, how would things look?’. You started by saying that there really aren’t enough hours in the day. You need to start focusing on your workload and being effective with your time. As we discussed this, you mentioned in passing that you are a ‘bit of a control freak’. In the same breath, you also said that all of your directors are better than you in their respective fields. You trust them and are happy to let them run with projects. However, you also get yourself sucked into meetings that you may not need to be in.

In our ideal picture we see you with more strategic thinking time and strategic execution time. You are less involved in proofreading, answering questions that aren’t yours and in the minutiae and meetings that don’t involve you. We also discussed a future where you work closely with your directors to drive corporate objectives. You mentioned spending more time on your visible external profile, winning new clients and exploring market opportunities. It would also allow you to take a more strategic look at the internal structure and culture within the business.

All of this can be summed up with the phrase ‘not doing the doing’. In the ‘plan–do–review’ cycle, your role
is to focus on the plan and review elements. We talked about the transition to a ‘hands-free’ business and the need to ensure that the business could run itself if you were run over by a bus. As a friend of mine once said, you judge a personal fitness trainer on how their client performs when they are not there.

Step 1 is to clarify and simplify your role to ensure that you can be as effective as possible. We need to sharpen your focus so that you know exactly where you should direct your energies to have the maximum possible impact. Once we do that, you stand a very good chance of both reducing the number of hours at your desk and making more of an impact on the business.

Our next step is also to look in detail at how we sharpen focus, control our point of focus and ensure that we’re focusing on the most effective things.

Summary

- Focus, confidence and motivation are all fundamental to peak performance.
- They are interdependent. They require each other.
- Focus underpins confidence.
- Confidence underpins motivation.
- To turn around a performance, it is often wise to start by clarifying our focus.