

## **Fun** **Dr. John Heil**

More and more athletes at the highest levels, are talking about “having fun out there.” This may seem like a no-brainer, particularly to those whose time at play is invariably cut short by the need to work. Who wouldn’t enjoy turning play into bucket loads of money? For those who get paid to play, the glory of game day is balanced by a daily grind of training, conditioning, nutrition, and playbooks, tactics, statistics – all in the name of surviving in the game. In other words, for those at the highest level, play is work. “What makes this work fun?” is a simple question, without a simple answer – a paradox pondered by sports pundits and Zen masters alike. Elite sport is a demanding performance environment, which rewards winners handsomely while it can punish losers harshly. It is certainly not child’s play.

But children at play is the epitome of fun. It is focused, free and spontaneous, exciting, energizing and enjoyable. A paradise of the mind. Without tension, doubt or fear, play defies pain and fatigue. Think of the child at the beach - lips blue and shivering – who begs to stay a little longer in the ocean because it is so much fun.

Doing things really, really well is fun too – and exciting, energizing and enjoyable. That is, mastery is fun. But the pursuit of mastery demands discipline, commitment and critique, creating a work ethic around play. No longer free and spontaneous, fun may be replaced by frustration and fatigue - the athlete even encouraged to play through pain. Think of the child who wants to skip practice – “just today.” Paradise is surrendered, set aside to another day.

Doing really, really well in a game is even more fun than doing really, really well in practice. But game day brings its own challenges. There is emotional intensity and pressure to perform, to enjoy the payoff for all that training – “or not.” Enter game day jitters – tension, fear, doubt. Feeling uptight and scared with your heart beating out of your chest and, a choking feeling in your throat is not fun. Memories of backyard football, pond hockey and soccer in a hotel hallway are emotionally miles away. Paradise lies out of sight, somewhere over the horizon.

The intensity of game day brings the possibility of even more fun. Figure that: Fun ‘plus’ intensity ‘equals’ more intense fun. For this to happen game day jitters must be transformed - from tension, doubt and fear into energy, focus and excitement. This is the role of sport psychology – another layer of discipline and commitment added. More work at play. But from its depths, the mind’s eye gains a glimpse over the horizon.

Then the game begins, the clock starts and time flows. If the player can flow with the game, sport can become fun again - leaving the grind of training behind, letting go of tension,

doubt and fear. If for just these precious moments, the player can focus fully, sport is again play - focused, free and spontaneous, exciting, energizing and enjoyable. The fun returns. Paradise surrendered becomes paradise rediscovered.

For insight into how fun factors in Norway's system, see the link below:

<https://www.lifeinnorway.net/why-norway-dominates-the-winter-olympics/>

## NOTES

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