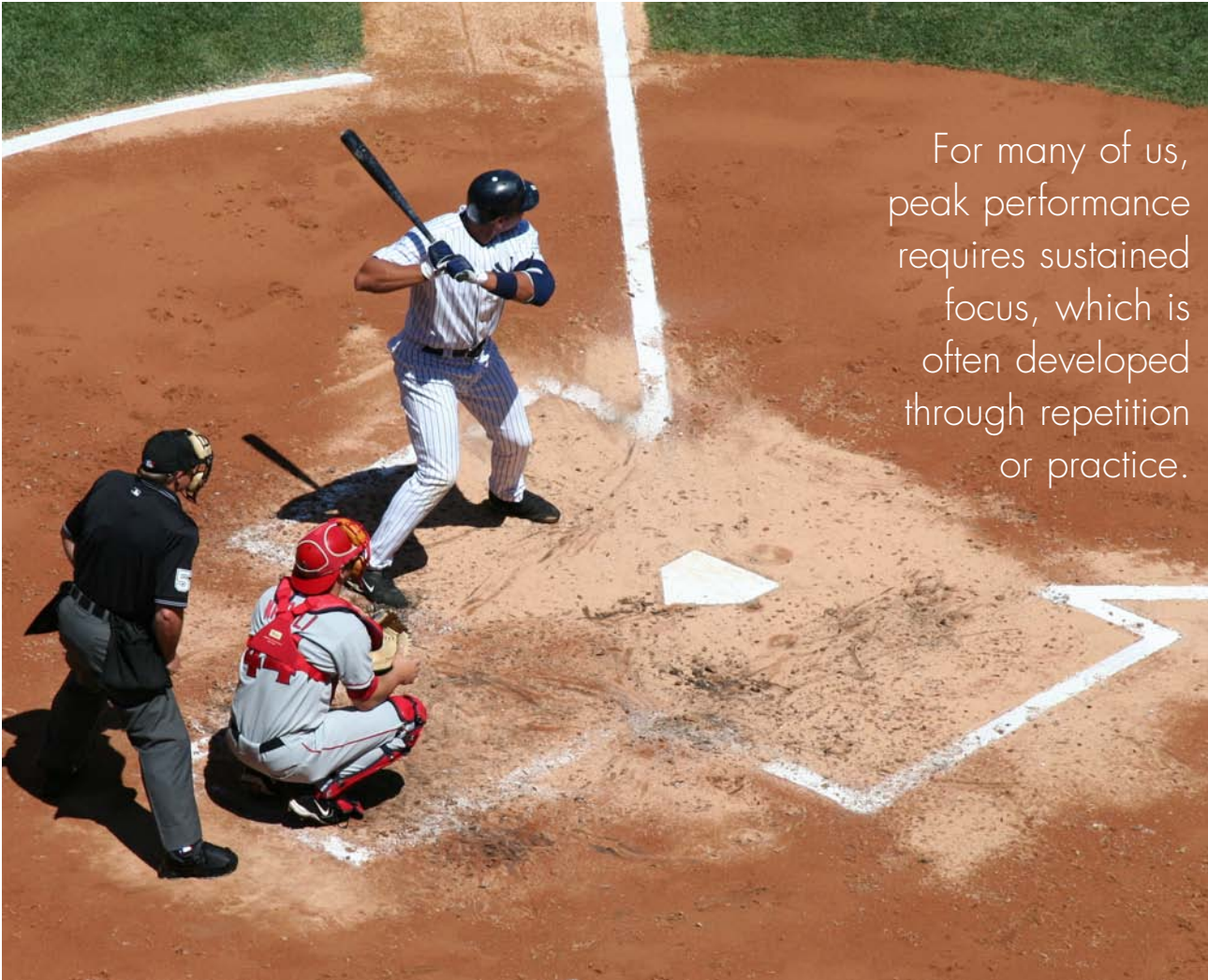


PROFICIENCY AND PERFORMANCE: HOW HABITS MAKE OR BREAK US

Dr. Charles "Mac" Powell

Each of us has experienced a time when we've reached a state of total, relaxed concentration and effortlessness in a physical or mental endeavor. It can happen in an athletic activity, like when we can't seem to miss a shot in basketball, or are seeing the "fuzz" on a tennis ball or the laces of a baseball. Or it can happen at work, when we're working on a project that demands our complete attention and hours go by without notice.



For many of us, peak performance requires sustained focus, which is often developed through repetition or practice.

In either case, we've reached "the Zone," and once we've been there, we want to go back. Reaching "the Zone" on demand, and being able to stay there for extended periods of time, is an important step toward our ultimate goal of achievable and consistent peak performance.

For many of us, peak performance requires sustained focus, which is often developed through repetition or practice. Athletes develop routines that magnify their concentration and limit intrusive thoughts. Some of these routines include breathing, checking environmental conditions,

visualizing execution, and mental checklists confirming proper starting posture or position.

One of the important lessons that many of my students learn is that repetition and practice develop both technical proficiency as well as improved performance habits.

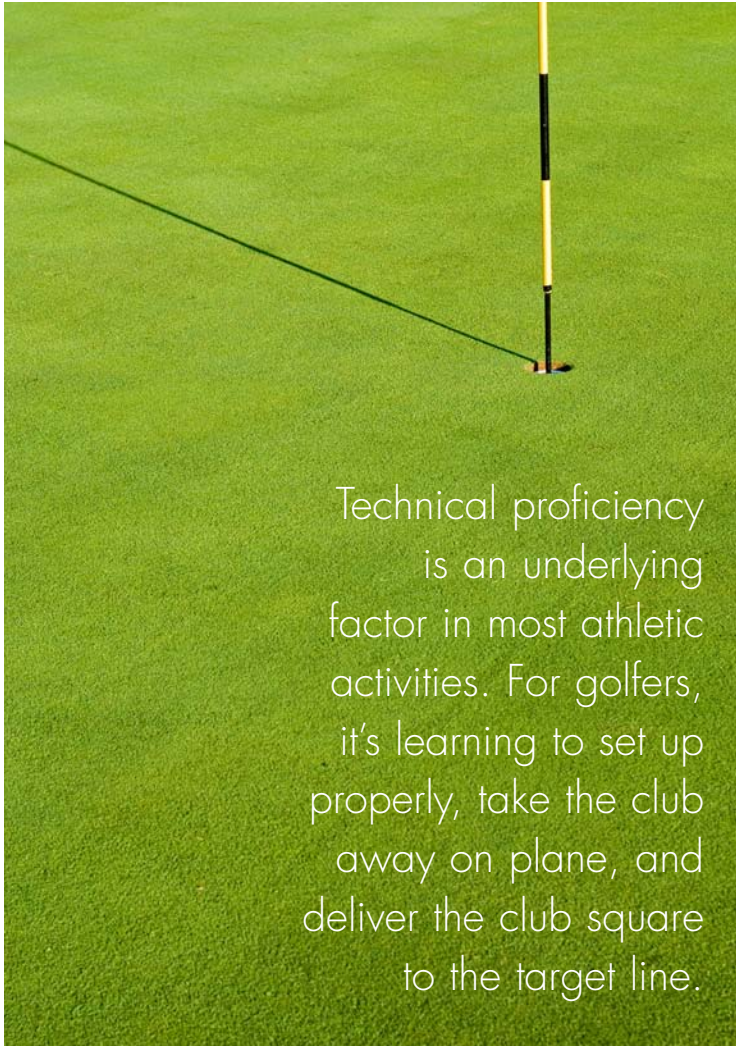
Technical proficiency is an underlying factor in most athletic activities. For golfers, it's learning to set up properly, take the club away on plane, and deliver the club square to the target line. Likewise, for swimmers, technical proficiency means developing an entry into the water, breathing regularly, keeping

Good athletes learn early that they practice in a completely different environment than the one in which they ultimately perform.



proper tempo and stroke, turning, and finishing on line.

Just as important as technical proficiency are proper performance habits, which are the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that accompany a particular athletic activity. These habits are often imprinted and reinforced during practice. Good athletes learn early that they practice in a completely different environment than the one in which they ultimately perform. This causes them to develop a set of beliefs and habits that are congruent with on-course performance. Athletes must constantly simulate performance situations during practice and develop a consistent mental



approach. By doing this, they will develop habits that will cross over from practice to performance.

Good practice habits, and ultimately peak performance, begin with a constant and neutral evaluation of the surroundings. Each shot is approached the same way using the same method of analysis and data collection. In golf, it means approaching the ball from the same line; evaluating the lie and wind conditions; analyzing where the ball should begin in the air, land, and release; and collecting any data available from competitor's shots or previous experiences with the course or conditions.

Students who practice hitting shots from the same spot, but use different techniques to address the ball or execute are employing the habits of inconsistency and carelessness (neither of which are ideal for peak performance). Students should take the time to go through a consistent process of analysis and choose to execute shots in the same manner each and every time.

A critical error I often see is that neutral evaluation is replaced with optimal outcome. Students typically visualize a shot based upon what they feel they "should" do, rather than what they "can reasonably" do. If a student hasn't executed a particularly

By remaining focused, relaxed, and consistent with our practice and performance habits, we have a much better chance of reaching “the Zone” on demand, putting us one step closer to our ultimate goal of achieving peak performance on a regular and sustained basis.

difficult or exotic shot in practice, he or she shouldn't attempt to execute it in performance situations.

Neutral evaluation accepts personal limitations, and the dangers of attempting shots outside one's comfort zone.

Working from within a personal comfort zone is really another way of saying

that an athlete is repeating what he or she has practiced. If a shot isn't comfortable, and hasn't been ingrained in practice, it shouldn't be repeated under pressure.

Habits begin with the way we think, feel, and behave. A constant mental approach supports the efforts of our body. You wouldn't take a

different swing with you to every shot, and you shouldn't take a different set of thoughts and feelings. Remaining balanced and neutral is among the most difficult challenges for athletes at all levels. Staying close to routines and developing repeatable practice and performance habits will help you stay in the moment and

focused under any condition.

By remaining focused, relaxed, and consistent with our practice and performance habits, we have a much better chance of reaching “the Zone” on demand, putting us one step closer to our ultimate goal of achieving peak performance on a regular and sustained basis.

