

RUNNER'S WORLD

Locking Into Flow

Learn to understand these moments to feel invincible and run your best.

By Phil Latter; Image by Getty Images

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In the moment, there was only speed, lightness and this repeating thought: "Stick with Purple!" Everything else—the small but dense crowd at an indoor college track meet in North Carolina, the digital clock showing increasingly risky splits every 200 meters, the song playing on a continuous 15-second loop in my head—just served as a sort of pleasant background to whatever was occurring deep within my mind and body. I locked in on the back of Purple's jersey and sped on.

We passed the mile in 4:28, my high school PR. Only this time, seven laps remained. It didn't matter. For once the usual negative feedback loop of "How many laps do I have left? How much longer must I hurt?" had been replaced with, "I wonder what I can do today. How fast can I run?" Four laps later I had the brilliant insight that if I simply managed not to trip on the rail, everything was going to be OK. Time was melting away like in a Salvador Dali painting. I was in fourth, Purple was in third. I was fatigued, but my self-confidence refused to waver. With a lap to go, I surged and passed on the outside.

Approaching the finish, Purple, better known as Jeff Fairman from High Point University, blew by me. So did a runner from North Carolina State. It didn't matter. I crossed the line, looked down at my watch and absolutely lost it. I screamed. I danced. I slapped hands with teammates and strangers alike. No doubt, I was the most excited fifth-place finisher the crowd would see that evening. Moments later the scoreboard lit up with "5 Latter, Phil 8:32.62." The dream was real.

Eleven years later, that 3,000m remains my most vivid racing memory, and, if I were to be completely honest with myself, the happiest moment of my life. Not for the external rewards, though 8:32 was a personal best by 24 seconds and a University of North Carolina-Asheville school record, my first. What overwhelmed me was how enjoyable the whole thing had been, from the crack of the gun all the way across the line. Never before had I felt more in control of my body, like I could respond to any and all challenges the race presented.

It also left me with questions: Why had my fastest race felt the easiest? Why had the positive splits and elite competition—the very things that usually caused me anxiety and self-doubt—instead propelled me onward?

As I cooled down that evening around Chapel Hill, I felt somehow different. I had experienced what positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls

"flow" and what is commonly described by athletes as "being in the zone." Everything came together when it mattered most, and that felt indescribably good. Best of all, I have since learned that it didn't have to be a one-off experience. Finding flow offers a chance not only for optimal experiences, but also a way to train better, race smarter and live a more fulfilling life.

Its Own Reward

People are happiest when they do activities that require skill and concentration. This may come as a surprise given our cultural attitudes toward difficult work (negative) and passive leisure (positive), but decades of research have shown that people report better moods and feelings when confronted with challenging tasks that have clear objectives. The Hungarian-born Csikszentmihalyi, observing this, developed the idea of flow in the 1960s and 1970s at the University of Chicago after questioning the theory that children played only to mimic adult behavior. His research found play to be fulfilling in its own right.

And not just for children. Rock climbers, chess players, gardeners, musicians, artists and runners all spend hours each week intently focused on tasks that emphasize the process over the product. Csikszentmihalyi defined these activities as autotelic, ones in which the activity itself is the reward.

"Basically, sports are not for anything other than the experience," he says today from his office at Claremont Graduate University, where at 79 he continues to research flow and teach full-time. "And that's why sport, like art, can seriously focus on providing experiences that are enjoyable by themselves, because [participants] don't have to care what the product is." For all the miles and tempos, the dead-legged days and races gone wrong, running is an inherently enjoyable activity that is done for its own sake.

When you become deeply involved in autotelic activities to the point that your mind no longer wanders, Csikszentmihalyi found that you enter a mental state known as flow.

In flow, your concentration locks onto the task at hand. You feel invincible, confident that your well-honed abilities will meet any challenge you encounter, even as the energy you expend feels effortless. You become egoless as your awareness and movements merge. Time speeds up. This is a peak moment, the essence of being alive. Not surprisingly, many of the best outcomes in sports and other areas of life come from people in flow.

Csikszentmihalyi believes running serves as an excellent gateway toward experiencing flow. "It's probably one of the oldest activities that humans enjoy," he says. "You can begin to lose yourself in the movements and the breathing and even the passage of the landscape around you until it becomes something that is almost a part of you. You are, in a sense, creating harmonious interaction between your body and its environment. And that can be very enjoyable."

Note the use of the word "enjoyable" and not "entertaining" or "pleasurable." Passive activities like watching television or twiddling with a smartphone turn the mind off by bombarding it with a stream of unimportant information. Sensual pleasures, like eating ice cream, occur automatically, requiring no focus or skill. Flow activities like running engage and challenge a person. In fact, it is the challenge that makes running so enjoyable.

The Challenge-Skills Balance

I entered the 3,000m race in Chapel Hill after the best winter training of my life. When I went through the first kilometer at a pace 41 seconds faster than my PR, I didn't panic. Instead, I realized that a winter's worth of long tempos and high mileage in the Blue Ridge Mountains gave me the strength to run so fast so comfortably.

Flow only occurs when the skills you believe you possess are matched by the

challenge you're facing. Csikszentmihalyi calls this the challenge-skills balance. Too little a challenge and you're likely to feel bored; too great a challenge and you get anxious and intimidated. In either instance, you can't focus enough to perform at your best. Csikszentmihalyi believes races are often an ideal way to experience flow because of the clearly defined challenges they present.

"In competition, what you're seeking is the limit of your skill, your strength, your speed, how fast you can run," he says. "If you try to do that alone, you don't really know what's a good run. You don't have information about the limits of what's possible."

You can't test those limits unless you've put in the time to develop your skills to a high degree. Bringing little to no skill to a task results either in apathy or feeling overwhelmed, the reactions most nonrunners have to the activity. To reach the level of skill that allows you to feel confident racing over long distances may take years of focused training.

The years of work are also what make the flow experience more rewarding when things come together. Experiencing flow, in turn, increases the motivation to train, because the experience is so enjoyable. "When people are in flow, they tend to perform their best and enjoy what they're doing," says Susan Jackson, who co-wrote *Flow in Sports* with Csikszentmihalyi. "Both of those factors tend to bring the person back." In this way, flow provides an almost limitless source of motivation to train to the best of one's abilities.

Clear Goals and Unambiguous Feedback

My motivation for that 3,000m race stemmed largely from a disastrous finish to the previous cross country season. Purple was one of the top runners in my conference. Sticking with him, I believed, would repair my damaged self-esteem. A time goal of 8:45 was in the back of my mind, but it was secondary to sticking with my rival. As a result, I ran faster than I ever imagined.

"Part of being in flow is having clear goals and getting unambiguous feedback," Jackson says. "Sport has many factors that help set up the right sort of environment for flow. You have clearly defined challenges. You know what you're expected to do. You know what the performance involves. You can measure it."

Goals can be short- and long-term in nature, even in the same event. A rock climber may set the ultimate goal of reaching the top of El Capitan, but if she doesn't direct most of her attention to finding the next handhold three feet away, she's unlikely to sniff the summit (to say nothing of staying on the mountain). In the same way, a runner may want to break 40 minutes in the 10K, but if she doesn't pay attention to her mile splits, she is unlikely to achieve this ultimate goal. More immediate goals help produce the moment-by-moment awareness that is critical to keeping your mind and body focused.

Experiencing flow depends on how you define your goals and what feedback you tune in to. For competitive runners, time goals offer the opportunity for frequent assessment and can be practiced during training. Shooting for a tangible time goal (sub-40 in the 10K) is often more valuable than aiming for a placing (top 30 overall) because you can better control that outcome. In some instances, a championship event, for example, or a race like mine where you face a known rival, your relative position is a concrete and motivational goal. In a race with variable conditions, like cross country or a trail event, a level of effort might be the most accurate and appropriate.

You also need to monitor the feedback you're receiving while being challenged. This doesn't need to be all positive, Jackson says, but it does have to push you closer to achieving your goals. Feedback can take the form of internal signals your body sends, such as breathing, form and fatigue, and external cues from your coaches, opponents and the clock.

Flow in Noncompetitive Situations

The thrill of racing Purple may have put me in a perfect situation to experience flow, but for others, competition is more likely to lead to paralysis. "Racing, for lots of people, is actually an antiflow experience," says Melissa Himelein, a professor at UNC Asheville who has taught a course on positive psychology and was an all-conference runner at Brown University in the 1980s. "It's too much effort, too much anxiety. When I ran cross country in college, I was always top five, so there was a lot of pressure to do well. On the track, I never got over how visible you are."

Because you can define a challenge however you wish, opportunities for flow can be found on any type of run. Nailing a fast interval session on the track or traversing a difficult mountain trail for the first are challenges that are likely to engage you. Himelein often finds herself in flow during wooded runs, but not because of their tranquility. "I have sprained my ankles countless times on trails," she says. "It gives me something to focus on. I get very in-the-moment and become very present-oriented. I'm not a present-oriented person. It has just never come naturally to me. So I tell people, 'Running—that's how I do it.' "

You need not confine your search for peak moments to your running, either. Flow experiences have been reported by factory workers on an assembly line and impoverished farmers in preindustrial cities. Flow occurs in those settings where people devote their full attention to their tasks and find ways to make their work challenging. Odds are you encounter small flow moments all the time when working on a complex problem at the office, cooking or designing a new piece of furniture in the workshop. Seeking out these types of smaller flow moments, in fact, is one of the keys to finding lasting happiness.

"There is evidence that for the quality of your life, it's better to have a lot of smaller flow experiences than to have a few large ones," Csikszentmihalyi says. "If you achieve flow only very occasionally in special conditions, you spend the rest of your life wondering, 'Why can't I achieve this more often?'"

Life to Its Fullest

Since that day in Chapel Hill, I've done my best to answer that last question. I have tried to embrace the challenges that running, writing, coaching and public speaking offer. I've experienced flow on a snowy trail run through the Smoky Mountains and when writing fiction for six hours straight. Delivering my daughter in the front seat of a Volkswagen on the side of a highway—let me assure you, that is the very definition of a flow moment.

Still, I find myself reflecting on my best race more and more as I get older. It is at once motivating and humbling, a reminder that I once found myself in a perfect situation and seized it like never before. "Those moments we can call 'peak experiences' or 'intense flow moments,' they're wonderful examples of living life to its fullest," Jackson says. "They are wonderful motivators showing us what we can do and be in life."

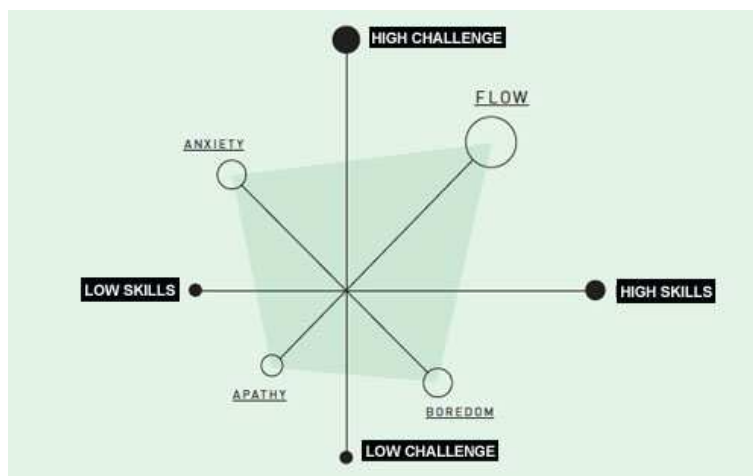
CHALLENGE VS. SKILLS

At the heart of flow is the challenge-skills balance. Flow occurs when high challenge is met by high skills. This graph illustrates the emotions that result from other combinations of challenge and skills. Understanding this balance can help in planning training, improving motivation, setting goals, working out race strategy and explaining to your brother-in-law why running is so satisfying.

FLOW AND GOAL-SETTING

Who hasn't hit the first signs of fatigue in a race and felt a bit of panic and doubt in their ability to maintain? Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi proposed that both the challenges we face and the skills we possess are self-perceived. While skill is ultimately physical, your ability to achieve and stay in flow depends on your belief in that skill. When you lose faith during the throes of a race, it throws off the challenge-skills balance.

You can counter this variability in confidence by setting multiple goals. If you



have only an ideal goal, whenever the perceived challenge exceeds your perceived skill, you become overwhelmed. When overwhelmed, you self-protect and withdraw from meeting the goal to create excuses, causing your performance to suffer.

Having two or three goals allows you to adjust the challenge mid-race when you start to doubt. By falling back to a less intimidating goal, you can regain a challenge-skills balance and refocus on running well rather than giving up (and figuring out how to explain why). Often, after you've dealt with the crisis and found your groove again, the ideal goal feels attainable and you can employ your skills to meet it.

—Jonathan Beverly

FLOW SENSATIONS

People who report flow experiences often marvel at the unique sensations that accompany them. "It gave one a feeling of almost supernatural ability," champion British distance runner Chris Chat-away told journalist Pat Butcher about a peak experience he had at the 1950 London-Brighton road relay. "I never had that before or since. I always think it's the nearest I came to being one of the gods." Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has identified four sensations that are common to the flow experience.

—Philip Latter

Action and Awareness Merge

When you are able to become totally absorbed in the task at hand, you often have the sensation of your body and mind working together seamlessly. This autopilot setting makes running, or any other skill, feel almost effortless because your body is so in tune with your mind and vice versa.

Sense of Control

It can be mistaken for cockiness by outsiders, but athletes in a flow state often describe feeling invincible and like they could do no wrong. This self-belief helps direct all your mental and physical energies in the same direction.

Loss of Self-Consciousness

Because all of your mental energy is directed toward performing your best, athletes in a flow state stop thinking about how others perceive them. This removes the ego from the equation and allows you to perform as you believe yourself capable.

Transformation of Time

Generally, in flow, time seems to pass by quickly. Total absorption in a task leaves no room for thinking about how much time is left. This leads to a distorted memory of how long an event took to complete.

CULTIVATING FLOW

Flow is not something that can be forced or willed into existence. It is a skill that requires constant refinement, and even then, there's no guarantee it'll

happen. Fortunately, certain actions increase its likelihood. These mirror many of the keys to being a successful runner, making them doubly advantageous.

Put yourself in challenging situations

If you never test the limits of your skills, you'll rarely have to fully engage your mind. Challenges always come with risks, but this only increases the reward when you live up to your expectations. If you do come up short, use it as motivation to keep working hard to develop greater skill levels.

Avoid passive activities

If you want to experience flow more regularly, you need to stay away from mindless activities like surfing TV or the Internet. "I have to consciously create time and space and activities that are going to produce flow," says Melissa Himelein, a professor at UNC Asheville. "If I don't, it's not going to happen. It has to be more intentional."

Set clear goals and respond to feedback

Knowing what you hope to accomplish in a run, a race or an entire season of training is critical to finding flow. Goals serve as checkpoints, helping you determine if you're getting the best out of yourself at a particular moment.

Practice mindfulness and thought control

"You can't be thinking about something else and get the best out of your body," Susan Jackson says. Don't distract yourself when running. If your thoughts wander toward self-doubt when training hard, shift them toward meeting the challenge of the present moment. This prepares you to stay focused when it matters most.

CHRIS SOLINSKY

RACE: Payton Jordan Invite (10,000m), 2010

RESULT: 26:59, American record, first non-African under 27:00

"Entering the event, there was talk of Galen Rupp going after the American record. This being my first-ever 10k, I was obviously a bit unsure whether or not I was quite that fit. It helped that I had raced Rupp many times before and regularly beaten him, so I told myself that if he could run [an American record], I definitely could.



As the race started, I settled in midpack and tried to shut off mentally. I was able to just fall asleep, stay relaxed and cover the moves until about midway, when I picked up a side stitch. I dealt with the cramp for about four laps until it faded. Once it did I began to enter the state of flow. The pace picked up to splits that would normally intimidate me, but in that state I did not even think about it. I was able to respond to every surge because I was focused on doing whatever it took to beat Rupp. With just more than a mile to go, I knew I was going to win; in fact, I was literally licking my chops. I decided I was going to make a move around 800 meters to go. I intended to not only make a move, but to make a statement. As I closed in on the finish line, I had no clue how fast I was running or that I was even close to 27 minutes until about 150 meters to go.

As I took my spikes off, I discovered a blister on my foot the size of a softball. I did not even realize it was there until then."

KATIE MACKEY

RACE: Payton Jordan Invite (5,000m), 2014

RESULT: 15:04, third place, 19-second PR

"As soon as the gun went off, I became completely focused on one simple thing: Just race. I didn't listen to splits. I just looked at my teammates' shoulders ahead of me. There are many elements that can go into a race, but I find it

helpful to just simplify my focus to a single goal. In this race, my goal was to win.

As the race progressed, I became more confident as I passed those around me and the lead pack became smaller and smaller. For a moment, with 600 meters to go, I started to think about how fatigued my legs were feeling and became distracted and stepped on the rail. It was a scary reminder that my goal was within reach but not achieved yet. As I regained my balance, I focused on relaxing my hands and neck and then was able to lock my focus back into the goal.



I always repeat to myself as I enter the last 150 meters of a race: "You can win!" Of course, it doesn't always happen, but it gives me the self-belief I need at that moment to dig down and chase the person ahead of me. By focusing on what I think I can do, it automatically pushes the thoughts of what everyone else expects me to do out of my mind.

When I'm locked into a race, I feel this amazing sense of belonging. I know that I am doing what God made me good at, and He must be smiling down on me. It was a 19-second personal best and a time that I didn't think I could run even on my best day. A total surprise!"

LEO MANZANO

RACE: 2012 Olympic 1500m final

RESULT: 3:34.78, silver medal

"With 400 meters to go, I thought I was going to give up. My legs felt so done. Then I thought about all the work that I had put in during my career to be exactly there. The ultimate goal was to perform well. As I pushed myself to continue the race, I thought of my supporters and began to pray to God to give me strength and energy to continue. I felt my body and mind reconnect. On the backstretch, I focused on the task at hand—to catch people, as I was in about eighth place. With 200 meters to go, I managed to catch Nick Willis [the 2008 Olympic silver medalist], whose kick usually rivals mine. Yet I continued right by him.



With 100 meters to go, it was as though time just paused. My mind felt clear, and I knew exactly what I had to do. I was in about sixth place and needed to pass at least three other athletes to medal. I started my kick and felt a great sense of confidence and energy to accomplish the goal. As I crossed the finish line, I fell to the ground exhausted, crying tears of joy. I looked up to the crowd and then realized that I had just become a silver medalist, a dream come true."

MOLLY HUDDLE

RACE: 2013 .US National Road Racing Championships (12K)

RESULT: 37:50, world record

"It helped that I was having really good training leading up to that race, so I had reason to believe it would go well. There was also enough pressure to want to win—because there was good prize money and a win would put me in the lead for the USA Road Circuit point standings—but not the crippling pressure of an Olympic trials or world-championship-type race.



I remember clicking off 5:05 miles behind Shalane [Flanagan] and realizing at

the turnaround point that I likely felt slightly better than she did because I handled the sharp turn easier and with more pop. I felt I could go longer than 12K at that pace. We even passed well under my 10K road PR en route and picked up the pace from there. It was fun to be getting the feedback of a good time and feeling I had the upper hand on a really dominant athlete without the usual pain involved in racing that hard and without questioning the outcome of the race. Usually I don't know if I have a shot to win until the very end when I find out in the kick if others were feeling as bad as I was."