

Brainspotting with Sports Performance— The shattered field of dreams (excerpted from Brainspotting :The Revolutionary New Therapy for Rapid and Effective Change).

I was working with Phil, a college catcher on a D1 (Division One) team on his throwing difficulties. Phil didn't have trouble throwing out a stealing baserunner or making any bang-bang (rapid) plays. These movements were all based on reflexive reactions and were not problematic for Phil. His problem was in the routine throwing the ball back to the pitcher after each pitched ball. That's when he had time to "think about it". This loss of function is a most baffling affliction for an athlete and is similar to the pro golfer who can't drop a putt from four feet or closer. It is known as "the yips" and athletes call it "the beast", "the thing" or simply "it". The yips are feared to be contagious and are so not talk about by athletes or coaches. Accordingly, athletes believe it to be a rare affliction, while in truth, it is remarkable widespread across all sports around the world. Athletes with the yips suffer in isolation, self-imposed and subtly imposed by teammates and coaching staffs.

Phil's throwing woes broke out early one spring season in his freshman year. A foul tip caught Phil right between the seam in his shoulder pad. His arm went numb down to his fingertips which pulsed. Two innings later Phil's toss back after a pitch sailed over the pitcher's head. Luckily, no one was on base and everyone, including Phil, laughed it off. Phil ceased laughing when he spiked the next toss back into the ground five feet in front of home plate. On the following throw-back, Phil's hand lock in a "death-grip" on the ball and his arm seized up. Phil actually peered at the ball in his hand feeling like he was looking at a foreign object. He literally froze and had to be removed from the game. The coaches called it an injury, but one coach had suffered the yips earlier in his career and recognized it in Phil. The coach worked with Phil around his throwing mechanics with gradual improvement accomplished. But Phil was never the same gifted catcher and each time he went behind the plate he felt increasing anxiety.

Phil went to see a sports psychologist who claimed a "one hundred percent cure rate" for the yips. The psychologist used the traditional combination of visualization, relaxation exercises, cognitive-behavioral "mental toughness" work and hypnosis. Phil experienced slight improvement that was quickly lost. The psychologist gave Phil homework, which Phil did dutifully. Frustrated with the Phil's lack of progress, the

psychologist accused Phil of “not working the program”. I suppose that’s how the sports psychologist attained his one hundred percent cure rate. Phil never returned for sessions and was even more frustrated and discouraged. He considered quitting the game that he loved so much and carried such talent in.

Phil was referred to me by a family friend. By that point he was skeptical that anything could help him. In the first session I took a brief history and then tried some initial Brainspotting to see how he would respond. I guided Phil to remember the first moment his yips arose. Three images came to him. The first was the ball he threw sailing over the pitcher’s head. The second picture was him spiking the ball and the third was being removed from the game. It was interesting, but not unusual, that he did not visualize being hit in the shoulder by the ball. We started with the first image. Phil’s SUDS level was eight and not surprisingly he felt it in his throwing shoulder. We found an Inside Window spot and Phil started processing. He immediately jumped back to being clipped in the shoulder by the foul tip. However, what followed caught me off guard. Phil’s processing jumped from one sports injury to another. First was a shoulder injury catching when he was fifteen. Next was breaking his hand at thirteen followed by an elbow dislocation that same year. The most powerful injury that arose was when Phil was knocked cold and suffered a severe concussion as a result of a collision at home plate when he was seventeen.

I suddenly realized that sports injuries are highly significant sports traumas. These sports traumas collect over time only to emerge, and sometimes erupt, at a juncture that is neither anticipated nor understood. Thinking back, I must have intuitively understood this as a result of all the sports injuries I had experienced as a youngster. My friends and I did not play organized sports as most kids do now. We played pick up sports which we organized in our own way. We chose whether we were going to play baseball, basketball or football and then we chose up sides. At times my friends and I would organize and play against another group of kids from the neighborhood or against kids from other neighborhoods. It was Queens, NY in the 1960’s. It was all spontaneous and almost always seemed to work out. Even without formal “little league” teams, the competition was fierce and the play was rough and tumble. It was not unusual for someone to get injured and I was no exception. We usually “shook it off” and “played through the pain”. Occasionally someone went down and had to be carried off the field and even carried home. Hospital visits were occasional but not unheard of. I

believe I suffered a number of concussions and remember acutely suffering a severe eye injury from being poked on the basketball court. I also broke my foot during football and played on, hobbling until the game was over. Sports injuries are still accepted as natural in sports, even with children.

In treating other athletes, following my work with Phil, I repeatedly observed how sports injuries were profound, cumulative sports traumas that interfered directly or indirectly with the athlete's performance. I had never read about this phenomenon in any literature on sports psychology or performance. In studying sports injuries as sports traumas I came up with a conclusion about why they affect athletes so powerfully. A physical injury is a trauma to the nervous system that is felt in the site of the injury and stored in the brain. But a physical injury, especially during sports, is also a psychological injury to the nervous system. The simultaneity of the physical and psychological traumas leads them to be recorded together, and as such interwoven and locked together in the brain and the body. At some level, I believe, the physical and emotional traumas become inexorably intertwined, especially as they accumulate over time. In that way, the athlete's nervous system is like a minefield that possesses an ever-increasing number of land-mines, waiting to be stepped on. Brainspotting, with its laser-like use of the visual field to explore and locate traumas held in the brain and body, is an effective tool to both locate these mines, and defuse them. But it is rarely a quick easy process, and Phil was no exception.

Session after session, Phil and I processed his sports injury traumas. There seemed to be a never-ending supply of his brain-body land-mines. During the course of four months of treatment, Phil slowly, and in fits and starts, regained his ability to naturally throw the ball back to the pitcher. But his treatment wasn't complete until he had Brainspotted two remaining life traumas. When Phil was two years old his mother had a complicated delivery with Phil's sister Sara. Phil's mother was hospitalized for three weeks and as far as he knew his mother was gone forever. Coupled with that attachment interruption, Sara's arrival on the scene left Phil feeling shunted to the side, even when his mother returned. The second personal trauma Phil suffered was the death of his grandmother when he was six. Phil had been very close to her; in fact she took care of him during his mother's absence following Sara's birth. With those traumas cleared with a combination of Inside Window, Z Axis and Gazespotting, Phil was able to throw freely and without anxiety.

Ironically, a few years later I had a chance to work with former NY Met catcher Mackey Sasser. My work with Mackey is chronicled in my book with Alan Goldberg, *This is Your Brain on Sports*. Mackey's pro career was ended by the most famous case of throwing back to the pitcher yips. In fact, this throwing inhibition is known in the baseball world as Sasser Syndrome and Mackey Sasseritis. My work with Phil and other catchers prepared me for treating Mackey. Mackey had a laundry list of sports injury traumas from childhood through pro ball. He also had significant personal traumas in his childhood and adolescence. All it took was three extended BSP sessions with Mackey and he was able to freely throw batting practice to the college team he coaches. Mackey also said the BSP lifted a fifty pound weight off his back.

Not every athlete has performance blocks of the magnitude of Phil and Mackey. But all athletes go through protracted slumps and loss of self-confidence. All athletes have experience failure and humiliation, which is traumatic in itself. When any athlete opens up they share the insecurities they carry regularly. During a slump it only gets worse. I have worked with athletes in numerous sports and have helped them to have shorter, shallower slumps. With BSP the athlete naturally flows back to their deep brain and away from the negative chatter in the conscious, thinking brain. The BSP Resource model is invaluable to help athletes ground in their bodies and feel more relaxed when they perform. In session we identify the Resource Spot where the athlete feels calm and grounded. I guide them to use that spot in between sessions, not just when they are struggling, but when they are feeling fine. The more the athlete works the spot the more grounded they become in it. It is not uncommon for the athletes I have treated to look to that spot for a few seconds just before the moment of competition. All athletes look for every edge they can find and this self-spotting provides it to them.

This leads to another application of BSP in sports, which I call the Expansion Model of BSP. The Expansion Model, in fact, applies to all performance, creativity and self-fulfillment as well. I prefer the term performance expansion to peak performance as the latter implies there are limits to performance enhancement.

Brainspotting is not just a way of clearing away and healing emotional wounds. A Brainspot is not just accessing where something negative is held in a person's system. There are Brainspots for virtually

everything including confidence, growth, insight and self-love. A few of my spiritual clients have found a prayer spot and even a God spot. A Brainspot is simply an access or portal to the deeper neurobiology and body. Each person possesses perhaps an infinite number of points in their field of vision that correlate to the vastness of their inner experience.

There are two applications of the BSP expansion model for sports. The first is with completion of clearing of sports traumas for an athlete, they are then ready to process in a positive mode. As always, the body is the way we access any experience in a person. I like to guide the athlete to return their awareness to the area of their body that held the negative activation the most during sessions. If the athlete is truly cleared, then this area of the body (often the chest, stomach, throat, head or back) will feel either neutral or positive. As such, all the BSP healing work we have done has turned an area of body vulnerability into a body resource. Athletes feel great power and resilience from the experience of turning a weakness into a strength. We find the Brainspot that matches this newly created Body Resource and process from there. Oftentimes I observe athletes looking ahead, anticipating positive performances. Sometimes their brain returns to past failures and spontaneously rewrites the scrip in a positive way. This natural revision process is a remarkable example of how the brain heals itself.

The second application of BSP performance expansion is for athletes who are not struggling, but are looking solely to improve their performance. BSP is not simply about removing blocks and alleviating anxiety. BSP is just as applicable to growth and resilience. A baseball player who is hitting .280 can try to improve their batting average to .300. A golfer with an eight handicap can try to drop it to a six. A miler can try to shave seconds off their average run. My belief is that that greater the performance of an athlete (or any other performer), the higher is the upside potential. If you talk to the greats in any sport they will account for you, accurately, their deficiencies. Remember, all athletes are carrying the neural burden of countless accumulated sports traumas. The best performers in a sport have the genius of adaptation at the highest levels. Clear out the top athlete's traumas and they have the potential to soar to new heights. Records in every sport fall all the time, even the ones deemed unbreakable.

In using BSP Performance Expansion with athletes who come simply to improve their performance I start by identifying their strengths and finding Brainspots for them. It is like a supercharged version of the Resource Model as we find where they feel the mastery and giftedness in their body's and then match it with any kind of Brainspot that flows with it. The processing that comes out from this expansion work is exciting, at times exhilarating. Occasionally an inhibition will emerge and then process through. If the athlete chooses we can, after this positive processing, do some targeted work to identify and clear through any sports traumas (usually sports injuries). After this is accomplished we shift back to the positive spot and body experience and it usually takes off from there.

Athletes and artists have a lot in common. Sports requires grace, agility and inventiveness, mostly expressed through body movement. Athletics has many overlaps with dance, with more subtle connections to acting, singing and playing musical instruments. Great athletes are often called creators as they make new, unexpected things happen all the time. When the myriad blocks are cleared away, they invent all the more