

I am fascinated by the "Zone". Athletes know about "The Zone". For an athlete the feelings of being in the "Zone" take place in the midst of competition – the time that matters most to them. In order to provide a summary of hundreds of conversations that I have had with athletes about the "Zone" I will describe it this way: In the "Zone" you feel a unified sense that skill, energy, emotion and thought have all connected and even though pressure on performance is considerable, you feel a great sense of freedom to be yourself and to fully engage in the moment at hand. What you are about to read about is a system for bringing on your Zone.

Enjoy!



Eric Hoffberg

The 5 Rules of The Zone

The Place to Be

As I look at the journey of my life I recognize that I have so many stories of being in the Zone and of helping others find their Zone. Although I don't know for sure how early in my life I used the term, the Zone has been showing up in my world all the way back to early days of youth hockey. Starting at nine or ten years old I had many moments on the ice where I felt a level of focus and energy that was beyond what's normal. Because of the connection I felt to myself and to the on-ice action I did more with my skills and with the opportunity that competition presents; I felt comfortable stepping up and becoming a major factor on the outcome.

As I evolved I found myself capable of being in the Zone in many aspects of life particularly in my work first as a hockey coach and today as a corporate coach and mental toughness guru for athletes. When I was a hockey coach feeling locked in and fully connected to the task was something that ultimately I was able to make happen frequently in the practices I ran and during my moments of game coaching. Today it happens in many key moments of communication, workshops, one-to-one meetings, speeches to large audiences are all spots where I have felt

something more in myself because of the way my energy and thoughts seem so beautifully connected to the moment.

For an athlete, the Zone, provides a sense of freedom and effortless focus. In it he is able to play with complete joy. Often, athletes report the action around them unfolding in slow motion, as if time itself was slowing down. Their hearing, sight, and sense of smell become dramatically enhanced; they cease to be distracted by the surroundings, and are able to stay perfectly focused and responsive.

The Zone is about optimal performance:

- Being in sync with the action.
- Executing at high levels.
- Bringing the best version of you to the performance of your tasks.

Once in the Zone, the athlete isn't trying to figure out who he is supposed to be, or what it will take to be successful. He has already done that – since the only way to enter the Zone is to do the prep work and follow the rules. Then the “here and now” becomes the universe, where he is firmly in the center.

Everyone can attain a zone where any task or effort can be optimally accomplished. This mental state is the only place you can be ready and able to do what you need to do, *and* learn, grow, and improve at the same time. Being in the Zone causes thoughts to be simple, orderly and clean. Clear thinking creates an abundance of energy; more can be accomplished with less effort. By being open to and aware of what is going on right now, you become receptive to newer growth and improvement opportunities.

Tasks and Performance

I think about two concepts when I think about being in the Zone: Tasks and Performances.

A **task** is an activity with an objective. There is a reason you are doing this thing.

- Anyone with the required skill can do a task.
- Being in the Zone means you're doing the right tasks at the right time.

Before the game or the journey, you can't know for sure when a specific task will be required for your ultimate success. You'll only know in the moment. The only way to make the best decision possible under such circumstances is *if you are focused on the challenge when it arises*. You will know the right task – if you remember to Be Here Now.

The **performance** creates quality in the task. It is how well you do the thing that is required.

- Performance is always a function of thinking and energy.
- Being in the Zone means the right task meets the right performance.

You cannot be in the Zone if your body is in one place and your thoughts and energy are someplace else. These aspects simply must line up. You can't be distracted by your upcoming vacation or last week's mishap and still expect to perform competently. By being in the Zone, you are mentally present and paying attention to how you perform all parts and sections of the task. You are here, now.

Your performance level is driven by the quality of your thoughts. When you are mentally present, all of your energy is present and available for the tasks you need to do as well. The Zone puts you in the ultimate state of *being present and focused* for the entire task and performance.

The Five Rules

The Five Rules of the Zone are:

1. Love What You Do
2. Be Who You Admire
3. Control What You Can Control
4. Live To Learn
5. Energize Those Around You

(This is my belief system for creating your Zone)

I don't buy the idea that superior preparedness is only possible for an exclusive group of people. I built this system for athletes and non-athletes to find their

personal Zone boundaries, how to get past them, and learn how to stay in there as much as possible. My objective is to take the mystique out of being in the Zone by demonstrating how optimal rhythm and flow can be created through *process, recognition, awareness, choice and specific focus*.

From everything I've seen and done, I firmly believe that anyone could regularly experience their very own Zone – if they just knew how to find it!

It's In There Somewhere

The Zone is lodged deep in the grey matter above your neck and below your hair. It's not over there in the area of your hopes and dreams. It's definitely not down there in the memory bank section with all those dusty old tapes and rote routines. Most people have stumbled into it at some point in their lives, but few know how to find it when they most need it.

To get there, you must develop the “thought muscles” that can unlock the entrance; as is true of any muscle, productive thought muscles need exercise to work well – and to *work well automatically*. The more you work at being in your Zone, the more you are able to perform in your Zone. The more you are able to find your Zone, the more you are able to stay in your Zone.

The opposite is also true: the less you use and develop your high-quality thinking muscles, the less frequently you will find yourself in your Zone.

How do you know if you are in the Zone? For me, when I am operating in the Zone:

- **I feel motivated:** full of productive energy, I want to do what must be done.
- **I feel clarity:** I feel at one with the ultimate vision I have for myself.
- **I feel strong levels of intuition:** I just know the right thing to do.
- **I feel like my true self:** I feel like I am uncovering and discovering what I already know to be true.

- **My mind is empty:** but my performance is full.
- **I feel unleashed:** I feel like nothing can hold me back.
- **I feel resourceful:** I feel like I can completely apply myself to the task at hand. I feel I can fully tap into all that I have learned.
- **I have the ability:** to "try easy" and get what I want, rather than "trying hard" and getting nowhere.

Here's a breakdown on each Rule.

Love What You Do: Create a Love List

You can train yourself to love what you do by creating a "Love List." Here's how it works:

Write what you love about some aspect of your life. It could be anything that requires your attention, energy, and focus. Be specific. Do this even if you don't feel you have a problem loving what you do.

These are many ways you can trigger a Love List. For example, complete sentences like these:

The five things I love about the work that I do are . . .

What I love about being a parent is the chance to . . .

When I am at my best, I am . . .

There are aspects of change that I love. I love change because . . .

Make a new Love List frequently – perhaps every day at first and whenever you feel like you're starting to get to the spot of burdensome attitude and lack of positive flow. The magic is in thinking about and writing about something that gives you joy.

Be Who You Admire: Create an Admiration List

Building your AQ (Admiration Quotient) helps you focus on personal qualities that will support yourself, take ownership of your journey and become more intentional. To create an Admiration List, answer questions like these:

When I am at my very best, I am . . .

When this task is over I want to admire myself for being . . .

I would hope that other people would say that I was . . .

My personal philosophy for excellence is made of these key points . . .

If I bring these qualities to all my tasks, I will have done the very best I can do (regardless of the results) . . .

When this [day, week, year, task, job, life] is done, I will know I did it the best I could if I . . .

Write about what you *are* and what you *do* when you are at your very best.

Your actions are evidence of your thoughts and beliefs. It is how you know you really believe what you say. For example: If you want to be admired for your kindness, write also about what that would actually look like in action. Describe the “be” and the “do.”

Being clear about what you want to admire in yourself is not just a signal for what you want to be and do; it’s a signal to create and achieve. The Admiration List gives you the chance to be specific about what you are going to accomplish. It is your personal story within the big story of the game, the task, and the ongoing journey.

Don’t be afraid to stretch. That’s the point. What you admired about yourself when you were ten years old is not likely to be the measure of a more fully developed adult.

Stretch, but also keep it true to who you are and who you want to be. You are writing for an audience of one: You. Being someone you admire is all about being true to yourself. It’s your Zone, not someone else’s.

Don't create a fake persona that mimics what you think you see in someone else. This will just lead to confusion and disorder. Don't try to be more intense than you really are. Don't try to be more motivational than you really are. Don't try to be someone you aren't.

Control What You Can Control: Build Your Thought-Muscles

Controlling what we can control is about overcoming distraction. It is the ultimate expression of Be Here Now; it's about living in the moment and giving focus to progression rather than getting caught up in being blocked.

There are a number of ways you can exercise your ability to control what you can control.

- Prior to starting a major task, you can prepare yourself by writing down all the aspects of the task that you can control.
- Saying the words “control what you can control” while doing a task can help you retain focus and stay in the Zone.
- When you notice yourself slipping from the Zone, you can use “control what you can control” to draw your attention back to productive thoughts and actions. Lock your attention on something specific you can control. If it is a specific activity, do it.
- Notice when you spin out of the Zone. Give yourself a time out and make a list of what you can control right now in this moment. Use this as a way to “be here now.”
- At the end of a task, make notes about what you learned about “control what you can control.” Make notes about how you could have worked the problem differently. Focus on describing you in control of what you can control achieving the result you wanted to achieve. This is an excellent way to detox a bad memory and program a new one.

Don't resist doing this exercise because you think it feels too obvious. This is about building new thought-muscles. You can only do that through explicit learning. Don't do a fly-by on this. Living this Rule is you taking ownership of your responsibility to yourself to bring on clarity no matter what the circumstance and challenge is.

Live to Learn

In competitive sports, it's pretty easy to see the distinction between practice and the game. During practice, we attempt to learn/improve on what might help us in the game; during the game, that's when we compete and play for real.

Outside of a competitive environment, most of us would never admit to a distinction between *practice* and *performance*. Do we practice learning, and then perform learning? When is Practice and when is The Performance when you are a parent? Or a teacher, a minister or a doctor? How about as a citizen? There shouldn't be, but our news is full of examples where people behaved as if it their lives were only a "practice", and not the real thing.

The breakthrough for me was to flip the whole thing on its head: *there is no useful distinction between practice and play.*

You need to have your learning motor running constantly. "I am always practicing, I am always playing, I am always learning. There is no difference."

People who think like that are in the Zone. They are the ones taking home the trophies.

- Before any performance remind yourself to Be Here Now. Every task gives you a wonderful opportunity to learn: About yourself, about your performance, about someone else, and about the larger game.
- During the performance, be present and take what the situation gives you. Impose your will when you can, and adapt when you should.
- Be open to the learning! Every opponent will teach you how he can be beaten; every problem will teach you its solution. Every friend will teach

what he or she needs in the moment. Every family member will teach you what he or she needs to feel loved.

- After the performance, do something to solidify what you learned. Talk about it. Write about it. *Find a new place to try and apply your new insight.*

This last point is the key. We all have genius in us. Within everything you do well is a framework to further success. When we commit to applying that framework to a different situation, we can tap into new skills, knowledge, and insights.

For example, consider what a basketball player knows he must do in order to make a foul shot:

- Square his body to the basket (stance).
- Place his hand on the ball perpendicular to the path of travel (grip).
- Focus on the target (aim).
- Put arc on the ball; give the shot a chance (shoot high)
- Follow through (follow through).

If a basketball player does those five things consistently, he will make a lot of baskets.

- Now let's translate those principles into a more general framework:
- Face your task squarely.
- Put all your energy directly into the performance.
- Focus (on the target)

- Aim high. Do more than you think it will take.
- Follow through.

Do you see how those principles would help a basketball player be more successful in other areas of his life? Here's the key idea. Those principles are powerful not only because they are a good guide to success in many types of endeavors, but because *their truth springs directly from the experience of the person who developed them.*

In other words, take your own “rules of _____” from one of your learning experiences, and apply your distilled version of it to something else you do. Create a new ritual and way of thinking and acting by *using something you already know works.* Apply what comes from your experience, from your genius, to the task in front of you. Learn from one task and apply the genius to the next thing.

Your commitment to learning brings on the level of attention you need in order to achieve at the level you want. When you remind yourself to “live to learn” in everything you do, you send yourself a signal to open up to the moment. This intention becomes a true decision as you consciously focus on learning what the game has to offer *right now.*

Energize Those Around You

Your Zone is the source of your power, your strength and your energy. When inside the zone, the love you bring to what you do energizes you. When you bring the best version of yourself to every performance and strive to be whom you admire, your focus and clarity energizes you. You protect that energy from leaking away when you actively seek to control the aspects you can. You use your existing strengths to create new strengths, and therefore new energy, when you live to learn.

Each of the first four rules is there to energize you and energize your performance. *When you do the first four, you generate energy.* It just happens.

The fifth rule will help you multiply your energy by energizing those around you.
We gain energy by lending some of our own to others.

When we give energy to others, we are acting powerfully. Energy stimulates more energy. Your own power grows. The power of the people involved in your pursuit grows as well.

- When you are here, now, your energy and focus is in this moment and on this task. You know you are present and so do the people around you. Your attention asks them for their attention.
- When you greet people with enthusiasm and really see them, they can feel your warmth and attention and an energy exchange takes place.
- When you perform with energy, it ignites the energy of others to the task.
- Your interest in high-quality execution brings out the best performance in those around you. They want to measure up. They want to step up.
- You acknowledge and compliment people not because you want something from them, but because of the energy that it creates in you. You create energy for them in the process.
- When you make quality requests (ask plainly and clearly for what you want and need) and quality commitments (state plainly and clearly what you will and won't do), people feel your integrity. Your integrity is a fountain of energy.

Being in your Zone will make you energized and ready to engage, so share some of that great energy with those around you. You create energy for yourself as you create positive energy for the people involved in your pursuit. Your energy energizes those around you.

The Five Rules of the Zone is the system that helps me do five important things:

- **Great Preparation.** I can use the Five Rules of the Zone to prepare myself with energy, elegance, and grace. I feel confident that I'll show up every time in a high-quality way.
- **Great Performances.** We have tasks and we have performances. When in my Zone, I am better able to know the right tasks to do at the right time. With increased self-awareness, I have the ability to watch myself and the activity around me, allowing myself to perform in a high-quality way.
- **Great Recoveries.** No game plan ever survives the first play. No journey goes as planned. Nothing goes exactly as it should. When I am in the Zone, I am able to notice, take what the situation gives me, and adapt. My learning engine is on.
- **Great Rescues.** Sometimes I get knocked out of the Zone. I lose focus. My love of the game leaves me. I become distracted by what I can't control. I stop learning. My energy leaves me. The Five Rules give me a map back into my Zone. I can "delete and replace" an unproductive thought with a winner. If I am well prepared, I might have something in each Rule I can rely on. If I'm caught flat-footed, I can start with the three words "Be Here Now."
- **Great Follow Through.** Just like shooting a basketball, great performances have great follow through. What just happened? What can I learn? What can I take with me to the next task? How can I strengthen my strengths and be more of whom I admire?

As you begin to use the Five Rules of the Zone in your life, things around you will shift. Your experiences will be positive, but not always. Your "mileage may vary", as the saying goes!

- You will experience some quick wins. Good things happen anytime you bring full attention to your performances and your tasks.
- People around you will respond. Some will be energized by the new way in which you roll; some will be confused or resentful. Their assumptions about you will need updating.

- You will be tested. When you make changes in how you roll, some of your puzzle pieces may not fit. Trying new things means that you will be in new territory using skills that aren't fully honed. You might feel like you've taken a step back.
- You will get stalled. Once the quick wins have been achieved, you may feel like you're treading water. You keep applying your new self to your new tasks but it doesn't look like progress is being made. Give it time to settle.

All of this is predictable. We don't make progress on a steady upward slope. We spend time on the flats and sometimes in the dips. What's important is that we keep rolling. We bring the Zone with us whatever we do and wherever we go. Some days we do a better job than others.

This is your game and your Zone. In this game, the only score that matters is the one you give yourself. As long as you do what it takes to be the best version of yourself possible, the rest takes care of itself.