Voice Lessons

How coaches get in athletes' heads

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At the 2003 World Figure Skating Championships, Tim Goebel stood by the ice just before his long program. At the time, people called him the Quad King. In figure skating, competitors gather speed along the ice, leap into the air, spin quickly, and land on a thin blade of steel so sharp it can slice open a skull. Done well, a jump is sublime: a crisp, impossible suspension aloft. Goebel was among the first men to complete four spins before landing, and the first to do so from three different takeoff positions. He had won bronze at the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics with a sweet, nonchalant rendition of "An American in Paris" that included three diamond-sharp quads.

To pull off such feats, an athlete needs a coach to catch and correct flaws during practice. While competing, Goebel would hold pointers from his coach, the revered Frank Carroll, in his mind. "My head needs to be *here,*" he would say to himself. He kept his thoughts empty as he began his routine in Salt Lake City, and then he focused intensely on Carroll's cues. With one jump to go, Goebel remembers looking over at Carroll and feeling connected to him, thinking: "We did our job."

The next season, however, his jumps became dicey. A one-hundred-fifty-pound man lands a quad with a force perhaps ten times his body weight, and to make them precise, reliable, and clean, Goebel had been doing eighty a day for several years. His hips had begun to fray. By the time the 2003 World Championships came around in March, he had dropped one of the quads from his routine. Yet he felt so good when he stepped out onto the ice for his long program that he wanted to do the third jump. As he skated past the spot on the rink where he would do it, he heard Carroll say, out loud, "We compete the program we practice." It was something he had said many times—but Carroll was on the other side of the arena, out of earshot. Yet Goebel heard the words in his voice, with his timbre. At that moment, he said, something in him "refocused." He suddenly felt calm. He felt complete confidence in what he was doing. He drew a breath, and followed Carroll's advice. He skated flawlessly.

In the Nineties, I stumbled across footage of Michelle Kwan skating and found what she did on the ice so beautiful that I couldn't look away. People say she translated the feeling of flight better than anyone else, and I am sure that's part of it, though I couldn't have summoned those words at the time. When her body spun in the air, I held my breath, and when she came around a curve on one blade, her other leg held back, her arms out wide as if to embrace the audience, I wanted to cry because it was so exquisite. I began to watch other skaters, and then gymnasts, because of what they could do with their bodies. I was drawn into the white-knuckle drama of whether someone could perform a precise, difficult skill on command, at the moment when it counted, under the focused scrutiny of thousands or even millions of eyes.

The physical task is the least of it. The athlete has done the skills in practice, after all. In competition, no sane person decides to throw in a double twisting double somersault they've never landed before. No, the sheer capacity to perform is not the issue: it's whether athletes can get their scattered, hyperventilating, nail-biting minds out of the way and just do what they are capable of, or whether they will be like the rest of us, who cannot. When they succeed, we marvel at their capacity to control

their minds. And yet of course, few athletes are so robotic as to have no fear. Many talk about feeling "pressure." What is pressure? I once asked a skater. Fear, she told me. Fear as heavy as dread. In the face of this feeling, competitors freeze. They choke. They question. That was what happened to Simone Biles at the Olympics in Tokyo last year. It happened to Michelle Kwan in Nagano in 1998, and to Sasha Cohen in Turin in 2006. You could see the doubt in their eyes.

In my academic work, I study the way pure, focused attention stretches time and makes what happens in the mind feel real to the senses. Over the past two years, I have interviewed eighteen elite athletes, including students at Stanford, where I teach; adults who are national champions or Olympians or contenders for Olympic teams; and adults who train alongside elites but are themselves, as one put it, perpetual students of the sport. That attention changes one's experience of the body isn't unique to athletics, of course. Writers find their mouth grows dry, their palms slightly damp, and the words flow out into the world. Actors at one with their character find themselves fully present onstage yet somehow completely attuned to sounds in the upper balcony. But sports provide a neatly bounded model for the universal problems: How do you get the self out of the way? How do you get rid of fear and doubt?

It's often thought that the key is to quiet the mind's clamor completely. Fans and commentators talk about expert players as being "Zen masters" or operating with "unconscious" ease. In *Flow,* the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes a state of total absorption, in which people are so involved in what they are doing that time seems to stop and thought fades away. When the Dallas Cowboys won the Super Bowl in 1993, their coach, Jimmy Johnson, said that he'd used the book to train the team. In *The Inner Game of Tennis,* W. Timothy Gallwey asserts that "images are better than words" for improving technique, because words are distractions: "Sometimes my verbal instructions seemed to *decrease* the probability of the desired correction occurring." David Foster Wallace once wrote that great athletes have different minds from the rest of us: they're able to not think when it counts. (That's why sports memoirs are disappointing, he wrote. Someone who can walk onto Centre Court at Wimbledon and spit in the eye of fear, chance, and screaming fans is usually not someone who can articulate what that feels like.) Some people, the thinking goes, are simply more able to turn off the inner radio.

The athletes I interviewed, however, said something different. Yes, they strove to suppress the worries and doubts that eroded their confidence. But rather than stilling their minds altogether, they invited their coaches' voices in. It is all too easy for us to imagine the mind as a vast immaterial universe, a kind of cavern for our memories, as Augustine once called it. From that perspective, it sounds strange to talk about giving another human control of your mind. Years ago, I toyed with the idea of studying a religion in which people allowed themselves to feel possessed by another being. I found the idea too unnerving to proceed. But in some ways we are all possessed by others. That's what the inner cacophony is. The voices of others jostle for our attention—a father's criticism, a colleague's snide comment, an unbidden conversation that unfolds

on its own. The mind is less an interior universe than a social world, an unruly party with noisy guests, and it's possible to use this social dimension to our advantage. Athletes use their coaches' voices to replace their own intentions and anxieties. They use them to cue what their bodies must do. When the pressure to perform is intense, some even hear the voices out loud.

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In 2012, Steven Solomon competed for Australia at the Olympics in the 400 meters. He'd broken a three-decade-old national juniors' record the year before, but coming into the Olympics he ranked twenty-first in the world. He should not have made the final—the top eight—in London. But he did, becoming the first Australian man in twenty-four years to do so. Four years later, he missed the qualifying time for Rio by four one-hundredths of a second.

Solomon loves the Olympics. What he loves most is that athletes have designed their entire lives to get there: how they eat, how they sleep, how they train, to whom they talk. He loves and also hates that all that effort comes down to a number, the time it takes to finish the race. It is clean, clear, and brutal. He qualified for the Tokyo Olympics and was a semifinalist. To make it to Tokyo, Solomon said, he needed what he calls conviction: an absolute certainty that he can and will be successful and that what he is doing is the right thing to do. Uncertainty undermines conviction, as do nerves: jolting, anxious thoughts that push up the heart rate; the terror of failure in front of a crowd; those unwanted, cancerous niggles. When Solomon was running at his best, he'd write a detailed plan for every minute of race day, scheduling time to let those thoughts enter his mind in limited chunks. "I will give myself the time," he told me, "to let my body feel the nerves and feel the excitement, feel the energy, and to think through the race." When worries came unscheduled, he would push them away. He would say: "Right now is my time to watch a movie. Right now is my time to eat my meal or enjoy my breakfast."

Simply suppressing negative thoughts often isn't enough. Athletes told me that they call to mind their coaches' words, often in their coaches' timbre, and focus on them so intently that the words fill the mental space and tell the body what to do. If the coach sounds confident, the athlete feels confident. If the coach knows what to do, the athlete knows what to do. When Solomon wanted to hit a certain cadence in his stride, he'd recite his coach's advice, like "Let your belly go." Amy Weissenbach became the fastest high school runner in the country in the 800 meters while working with a coach who told her to "slam the door" when she came around the corner. She'd focus on that phrase in competition because it captured the slingshot feeling she wanted, the feeling of getting a pop off the track and dropping those behind her.

The American skater Alissa Czisny began to win when she started using her coach's commands to block out other thoughts. She is stunning on the ice, lithe and elegant, with a mesmerizing spin and a ballet turnout. But nerves made her performances uneven. In 2005, she'd won her first major international competition and placed second in another, but at the 2006 nationals she fell three times in the long program and

finished seventh. She finally won nationals in 2009, although she still fell. The following year, with an Olympic berth on the line, she struggled again, and ended up in tenth place.

At that point she started working with new coaches, Jason Dungjen and Yuka Sato, who were known for working well with the anxious. Dungjen and Sato gave her technical points to focus on as she skated out to center ice: "Put your shoulder here and snap your feet together." With her previous coach, she'd try to find the feeling in her body that told her the jump would be good. But when the feeling wasn't there, whether because of nerves or injury, she didn't know how to get it back. The new instructions weren't about feeling at all. They were specific tasks, and perhaps more importantly, they didn't come from her own mind, so they weren't entangled with her doubts. The technical cues would blot out the things that normally obsessed Czisny: that her mom was watching, that all those people could see her through the television cameras, that she could fall. As she entered the 2010–11 season, she went out for her long program at Skate Canada and remembered using the sight of Dungjen at the boards like an anchor for his words in her head, and she won again. That season, she won nationals too.

The capacity to use these technical cues effectively—to focus on your coach's words in the mind so intensely that the focus drowns out your own anxious quiverings—is both a gift and a skill. It's the same kind of skill people hone in prayer and meditation, something I study when I'm not watching figure skating competitions. For years I spent time with Christians who sought to hear God speak to them. When they were new to the church they'd be daunted by the idea. Then their fellow congregants—along with sermons, retreats, and hundreds of manuals—would teach them how to pick out the words in their mind that might be God's. They'd look for thoughts that stood out in some way—louder, more spontaneous—and they'd ask themselves whether those were the kinds of things God might want to say to them. They were always aware that they were searching for God's voice through the foggy mists of their own inner worlds. But they were also clear that over time, they became more able to identify what they took to be God's voice—and that as they did, the voice stood out more, and sometimes they felt they heard it with their ears.

That the focused attention in sports resembles that of prayer may explain why, when an athlete succeeds, it almost feels like a religious high. Athlete after athlete spoke to me of that out-of-self experience, the sense that one has expanded and that the world has cracked open and is vibrating with life. You feel that only in competition, they said, and you compete because you want to feel it again. (Sometimes, though, athletes focus so intensely that they lose all memory of the event. Shawn Johnson remembers nothing of the beam routine that won her gold in Beijing in 2008.) I remember watching Kwan during the 2004 nationals, the moment after she landed her last jump in a perfect program. She flung out her arms to skate down the ice, an expression of pure joy on her face, the audience screaming and cheering so loudly you could barely hear the

music. *That,* the retired skater and commentator Peggy Fleming said on the broadcast, is why she competes. To feel *that.*

Unlike those who pray, athletes are trying to hear familiar words, not discern new ones. But in both cases, they are ceding authority over themselves to another mind. As a teenager, Tyler Marghetis won a Canadian national title in wrestling. Then he went to Montreal to work with a coach known to be tough but effective, who set out to restructure his mind. The coach gave him firm advice on where to live, whether to date, and so on. He insisted that his wrestlers read sports biographies to understand the winner's mindset. (Marghetis remembered one about a Soviet track star who made a habit of never looking at his medals. The lesson: stay hungry.) And he set out to cultivate their microattention by giving them phrases he wanted them to repeat in their minds throughout each match.

Marghetis experienced these phrases differently at different times. During practice or unimportant matches, he heard the words like soothing background patter. The voice was generic: not Marghetis's, but not really his coach's either. The voice faded out at times, as his awareness narrowed in on his opponent. But during more difficult matches, the voice got louder and clearer, and Marghetis would start to hear it in his coach's thick accent. Over time, as he trained, he started to feel as if the voice controlled him, like a propulsive force that knew what he needed to do to win.

Marghetis never got anxious like his teammates. In fact, he'd yawn before matches. And he was conservative. He'd hold back. His coach wanted to rev him up, make him more aggressive from the start. His key phrase for Marghetis was "Get in, get in": get out of your comfort zone, get into your legs, and take the risk you need to win. As the voice grew stronger, Marghetis felt that matches became a kind of argument between the natural conservatism of his body and his coach's voice. He eventually finished as runner-up for the Canadian men's seventy-four kilogram freestyle wrestling spot in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, a devastating loss and a great achievement.

It's when the coach's voice feels autonomous that it often works best. It is hard to change habits on our own, as most of us know. The majority of the athletes I spoke to described the coach's voice as having its own volition, at least sometimes, even if they thought of themselves as evoking it deliberately. In fact, some said that at times they weren't sure whether their coach was actually yelling at them or not. The Australian runner Louis Stenmark, another Olympic hopeful, said that when he ran, it was like hearing things underwater. In a good race he ran so completely in a bubble that nothing else could capture his attention. He wouldn't hear the crowd, the screams, the stadium noise. But he heard his coach as he came off the starting blocks: "Drive, drive, drive." It was like having "an ear inside your head." He trusted the voice more than he trusted himself.

Mikaela Brewer, who was a runner in high school, would hear sharp little commands as she went over the hurdles: "Keep your left arm high, keep your toes up." When she heard them, she knew what to do. It was comforting, almost as if her coach were riding on her shoulder.

Then she took up basketball, which was much more complicated. Her coach had detailed defensive scouting reports that she found difficult to remember. There were videos upon videos. They'd play two teams a week. During games, the coach would shout instructions to her, but Brewer couldn't hear her. Basketball games are loud. Still, when she looked over at her coach, she'd remember what she needed to do, "like she was a symbol of these packets of knowledge that I needed to retain."

When things go badly, however, the coach's voice can feel like an attack from within. The skater Dave Lease calls his nerves the "war in the mind." He has loved figure skating since he was a boy. A family picture shows him at the age of nine or so under the tree on Christmas morning with a huge grin on his face, holding a big book on skating he'd just unwrapped. He didn't skate much as a boy, but as a young man he began to blog about skating and gymnastics—they're the same sport, he likes to say—and in his twenties, he decided to compete in adult skating, the field for those beyond the age of Olympic hopefuls. He wasn't prepared for how physical his anxiety would be. In competition, his knees behaved differently than in practice: stiffer, tighter, with the flexibility of a brick. Nor was he prepared for how naked he felt on the ice. In skating there is a score for athletic movement—whether a jump or spin is completed, and how well—and also for artistic performance. He felt as if he were being judged as a person, he and his body on view for the world. He said that when he heard the gate click behind him as he stepped out onto the ice, he felt like he was going to die. He knew this was irrational. He had chosen to be there, and most of the time he did well under pressure. Yet he felt it anyway.

Using his coach's voice helped him manage his mind. "Turn, let your arm go, yes, okay," or "Keep your left arm in front and swing your legs faster." But it was tricky. If he thought too much, his concentration would snap. Once, he was nervous about a spin in a competition, and he thought about his coach telling him not to be nervous. That made him more nervous, and then he missed the spin entirely, felt awful, and thought his coach would feel awful. When you make a mistake, he told me, you feel what your coach feels. You don't just have your own disappointment and anger, but also hers.

And coaches can be outright cruel, to say nothing of authoritarian or abusive. Sometimes they goad their athletes, believing that they perform better when angry. Bela Karolyi, who coached the gymnasts Nadia Comaneci and Mary Lou Retton, was famous for ignoring his athletes and yelling at them. In an interview before the 1992 Olympics, he accused Kim Zmeskal, his prize student, of being lazy. Before Peggy Fleming's world championship program in Davos, her mother tore up her boyfriend's letters so she'd be angry on the ice rather than scared. Athletes learn to use the angry coach's voice to survive the pain and misery that comes with training your body beyond what most can bear. As a sophomore in high school, Hannah Boyd was one of the best swimmers in the country. She could push. At the end of a race, she'd hear her coach screaming in her ear, "Keep going, don't be a baby, don't show it, you're not suffering," even when he was not there. She found that helpful. The human body,

she said, is designed to perform miracles in fight-or-flight mode. The mean voice was good, because when the pain was so bad that she didn't want to be there anymore, she told me, the voice wouldn't let her stop. Sometimes after practice she'd lie beside the pool, hyperventilating and crying.

Then her times slowed. Her coach thought she'd do better if she got thinner—she'd never had the perfect swimmer's body—but that didn't help. Then one day she slipped on the locker room floor and got a concussion. Her career as a swimmer was over. But that inner voice didn't go away. Boyd would stand in the dining room and hear her coach berate her in her mind. Other athletes described a similar experience. Years after Amy Weissenbach finished her competitive track career, she still found it difficult to get her coach's voice out of her head. When she ate after 9 pm, she'd remember him saying, "No eating after 9 pm." (Her coach denies imposing eating rules or singling runners out, though one of Weissenbach's teammates corroborated both.) When she ran at night to get back into a training routine, she heard his voice shaming her in front of the entire team for breaking a rule about running after dark.

When athletes discussed the helpful aspects of the coach's voice, they spoke about technical specifics: how to get over a hurdle or into a loop jump. When they described its harmful ones, they spoke of general traits that defined their character: *You're no good. You're lazy. You'll never win.* They heard the words again and again. Maybe their coaches actually said those things; maybe they implied them. Maybe the athletes just felt so awful when they began to fail that they attributed the words to their coaches.

The thing is, almost all elite athletes eventually fail. Every competitor I interviewed told me stories about failure—how they were alone on the ice or the balance beam, how the coach doesn't run the race for you, and how it's your fault when you fall short. Unless you won the gold medal at the Olympics and retired right afterward, one athlete told me, you've failed. Your hips break, your times slow, your ankles no longer bear your weight. For every brilliant gymnast who competes with the hope of an Olympic gold medal, there are hundreds who have given up, who did not make it. Many devoted years to the sport before they dropped out. They've generally been homeschooled, often lightly. They haven't played outside or gone to football games or learned to do anything that wasn't in the gym. They have nothing but the sport, and then at some point, they don't. For many of them, that inner voice that helped them believe in themselves goes bad, and for some it doesn't go away. One afternoon, a former track star sat in my office weeping. You give away control of your body when you come to college as a varsity athlete, she said. You give it away, and even if you quit the team, you never get it back.

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