

# Sweet Uncertainty Concept

## Motivation

There's very little doubt that motivation plays a big role in the outcome of any performance, in most training and racing contexts. But what is motivation? Well it's quite a wide concept belonging to the domain of psychology. For our own specific purposes, we can categorize it into 3 distinct types: Intrinsic motivation, extrinsic self determined, and extrinsic non self determined. The first category is self explanatory. It's just pure passion for the activity, regardless of any other reward or goal. I like to run, just for the sake of doing it. Doing it simply makes me feel good. Extrinsic self determined is the sort of motivation we get in deciding to do something having a specific purpose in mind. For example, I train in the pool to improve my time over 1500m. Non self determined implies some pressure from outside the individual. An example would be my coach wants me to swim the 1500 to help the team, despite the fact that I don't really enjoy it. Ideally, we should aim at exploiting the two first motivation types through our coaching, the most important being the second type, extrinsic self determined motivation. Intrinsic is important but you don't want to rely solely on this since it tends to vary too much according to our moods or other factors.

In most coaching situations, there's often a very thin line between self determined and non self determined motivation. A good way to get an athlete to commit entirely to something, head and soul, is to dress most key training elements in terms of Challenges.

## Challenge Driven Coaching

As a very simple but rather compelling example, let us turn a plain swim set into a Challenge. Let us use the good old 10x100meter intervals for this. Swimming 10 times 100meters with 30sec recovery between each is fairly plain, in its presentation. Performing the same set on fixed "send off" intervals; that is, having to initiate a new repetition every 2 minutes can already be considered as a challenge. The interval includes the recovery period; the pace has to be kept constant in order to preserve the recovery. Finally, performing the same set whilst trying to maintain a challenging stroke rate would be the icing on this tasty Challenge Cake.

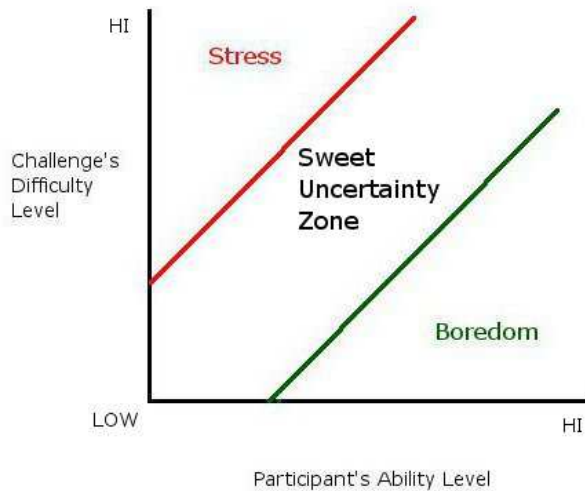
In order for the athlete to become motivated in fully engaging to any challenge, a simple rule should be followed: The challenge has to be carefully set, in order to be motivating.

## The Sweet Uncertainty Concept

A challenge that is too easy will probably trigger boredom. For instance, a tasteless challenge is often a great recipe for indiscipline when coaching kids. On the other hand, imposing a challenge that is too difficult could trigger too much stress. Making it way too spicy will spoil the meal. In between these two poles, there's a nice zone. It's been described by some researchers as being the Sweet Uncertainty Zone (Brunelle et Tousignant; 1988)(1). A challenge that is made difficult enough so that the athlete isn't entirely sure that she can cope with it, but in the same time easy enough to be achievable given enough

commitment would fall in this zone. The Sweet Uncertainty Graph below shows a graphical representation of this Zone.

## Sweet Uncertainty Zone Graph



### The Flow / The Zone

Succeeding in balancing the difficulty level of a Challenge should help the athlete entering in what Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described as being the Flow State (2); also known by the sports community as "The Zone".

"Flow is the mental state of operation in which a person in an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity. Proposed by Mihály Csikszentmihályi, the positive psychology concept has been widely referenced across a variety of fields.

According to Csikszentmihályi, Flow is completely focused motivation. It is a single-minded immersion and represents perhaps the ultimate in harnessing the emotions in the service of performing and learning. In flow the emotions are not just contained and channeled, but positive, energized, and aligned with the task at hand. To be caught in the ennui of depression or the agitation of anxiety is to be barred from flow. The hallmark of flow is a feeling of spontaneous joy, even rapture, while performing a task." (Wikipedia)

### Practical Application of the Concept

The Sweet Uncertainty concept leading up to the Flow state can be applied to both learning and training. Earlier in the article we referred to a example in which a simple 10x100m intervals swim set was turned into a simple challenge. The following examples try to show a few practical scenarios applied to learning new abilities.

### *Learning how to draft for performing better in triathlon swim legs*

Obviously, asking an athlete to swim close to another athlete in order to learn about the benefits of drafting is already a good idea. But there's a great opportunity there to turn this experience into an exciting challenge. For example, this athlete could be invited to try to break a personal best time over a significantly long distance (say, a 400m time trial) by teaming up with another athlete that is easily capable of swimming that distance on target pace alone. In fact, this specific scenario has been experimented during a Swim Smooth Clinic with great success. The subject definitely entered in a great Flow state, broke his PB over 400, felt that he could have swam even faster, and therefore will probably never forget this experience.

### *Learning to win over the fear of performing our first triathlon ever*

One day, I was asked by an ex American football player to prepare him for his first triathlon. The problem was that this person didn't know how to swim the Front Crawl and was scared of swimming in the deep end of the pool. He only had 2 months to learn how to win over this fear. So obviously, a great focus was put on learning how to swim. This person wanted to prepare for one single event, his first and last triathlon for this year. I thought that this was a good recipe for failure. In essence, the day of that even, there was a strong possibility that this challenge be way to stressful for what the athlete could handle.

Therefore I propose that the athlete register to another triathlon, 3 weeks before his 'A' race. The purpose of this early try was simple: Being able to experiment a full swim leg. The directive was: Once you make it to transition 1, you can wrap up and go home. That would be a mission accomplished. That obviously lowered the stress level. The option to persist into the event by completing bike leg was open, but optional. The option of performing the run leg if he ever made it to transition 2 was also open but highly optional. The methodology was also very simple. The athlete was teamed up with a strong triathlete. That strong triathlete's mission was to stay next to him at all time during the swim portion.

Panic attacks did occur at several occasions, like expected. But the athlete was comforted by the presence of his team mate. They finished the swim leg together, and in fact did the whole sprint triathlon together side by side in a time of 1h53. The stronger team mate could have easily done 1h05 over this distance.

In the end, his ex American football player performed a perfect 'A race' sprint distance in front of his family and friends. He did this by his own with no panic attack; only 2 months after having began to learn how to swim in the deep end of the pool. He did enter the Flow and did experiment a 'dream race'. He's now fancying to commit to 6 races, including an Olympic distance this season.

Ref: "La supervision de l'intervention en activité physique" by Brinelle, Drouin, Godbout et Tousignant

Ref: "Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play" by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi