**Theoretical Orientation of Performance Excellence**

*“What we know matters, but who we are matters more.” - Brene Brown*

 **Theory of Authentic Performance.** My theoretical orientation of performance excellence is called the theory of authentic performance. It was developed using evidence-based research I learned in the master’s program of sport and performance psychology at the University of Western States and a decade of athletic experience as an international jiu jitsu competitor. I believe performance excellence stems from authenticity, acting in line with one’s values rather than the pressures of the status quo (Goldman & Kernis, 2002). Authenticity aids in self actualization by allowing an athlete to explore their unique potential. This process requires: values, self-compassion, emotional intelligence, and psychological safety. My role as a mental performance consultant is to facilitate the athlete in knowing and liking themselves so they may confidently strive for greatness.

**Mastery Approach to Coaching.** The overarching framework I employ with my clients is the mastery approach to coaching (MAC) because it embodies a positive approach that raises self-esteem, increases desirable behaviors, promotes effort over outcomes, and reinforces enjoyment and well-being (Smith & Smoll, 2012). This approach champions a task goal orientation that values personal improvement over an ego goal orientation that focuses on comparison. As a consultant this looks like applauding a client’s effort towards personal growth with verbal affirmations, promoting mastery, and collaborating on realistic but challenging goals. Unfortunately many athletes find themselves in environments that value winning over their well-being so it is my mission to motivate my clients to do their best as authentically as possible, see success as a consequence of effort and skill development, and celebrate wins no matter how small.

**Theoretical Underpinnings.** The theoretical underpinnings of my theory of authentic performance stem from acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, 2016), self determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977). The tenets of ACT that I employ are acceptance of struggle and commitment of action in line with established values.Values are the guiding compass in our lives. When athletes clarify their values they create consistent ways of doing things. It is through these values that my clients can understand if they are acting in accord with their authentic self. Self determination theory provides a framework for my clients to establish their baseline psychological needs–autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When an athlete is autonomous, they are accountable for their actions and empowered to take hold of their success. When an athlete is competent, they feel they have influence over their environment and have validation they are good at what they want to be good at. When an athlete feels they belong, they feel safe to act authentically and contribute to their community. All three aspects allow for my clients to reach their potential because when basic psychological needs are met they are more likely to strive for excellence. Self-efficacy theory leads to successful outcomes through four principles–mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experience, and performance states. An athlete is most likely to attempt challenging goals if they have had previous similar success, are told by authority figures they can accomplish their goals, see other athletes achieve similar goals, and are within an ideal arousal state. When athletes gain self-efficacy, they gain the ability to vision themselves where they want to be and feel that they have the capacity within themselves to realize their potential.

**Self Compassion.** I believe that reaching one’s own performance excellence requires liking oneself and separating performance outcomes from self-worth. This can be difficult in a sporting environment where performance results are often the main indicator of success. Striving for excellence is challenging and can cause internalization of social pressures. To combat this, I promote self-compassion, or kindness in the face of struggle. When athletes lean into self-compassion they offer themselves nonjudgmental understanding to their own inadequacies, failures, and pain (Neff, 2003). When athletes are mindful of the way they treat themselves, they can capitalize on moments for self-compassion rather than self-criticism. Self-kindness allows athletes to treat themselves how they would a great friend. Common humanity sheds light on struggles that make the athlete feel less alone and normalize struggles. Without self-compassion, an athlete is more likely to internalize pressures and social norms that may not serve their authentic self.

**Emotional Intelligence.** Another way that I help athletes navigate challenges is by increasing emotional intelligence. There are four steps to this process: awareness to identify and label emotions, recognizing emotions in others, manipulation the mask of emotion to opponents, and self regulation to maintain appropriate arousal. Once athletes understand how emotions affect performance, they can use this skill to maintain composure in the face of challenge. Athletes who lack emotional intelligence miss relevant cues that give insight into the self and others. Understanding emotions, then, is another tool for athletes to understand their true feelings and motivations.

**Psychological safety.** The last element of authentic performance is psychological safety (Clark, 2003). Athletes who feel safe to reveal their authentic selves in their performance setting strive for excellence without fear of being vulnerable. Valuing athletes as humans, and not just their athletic role reduces the pressures to conform. Learning safety allows athletes to make mistakes for personal growth. Contribution safety allows athletes to voice their opinions and challenge safety allows athletes to advocate for themselves without negative consequences.