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# **Zonefulness: The Ultimate Guide for Student Athletes**

## **Zone Exercises Team Building**

2016 NABC Coaches Convention  
The Final Four  
Houston, TX  
March 31-April 4, 2016

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## Zonefulness

### The Toxic Three of Poor Performance: Zone Blockers (Symptoms and Anxieties)

#### The Toxic Three:

**1. Self-criticism**

(negative self-talk; analyzing and agonizing).

**2. Why-ning**

(negative focus on past poor performances and outcomes). “Why did I do that?”

**3. What-ifying**

(negative focus on future poor performances and outcomes). “What if I fail?”

I have been working as a peak performance specialist with student-athletes at the elementary school, high school, and college level for more than 20 years. I’ve also done extensive training with professional athletes over this period of time. Whether it’s a little league baseball shortstop, a high school field hockey player, a college swimmer, or any athlete from any walk of life; I have been routinely peppered with toxic questions and negative expectations from student-athletes.

I have discovered that the most common questions are variations of “What-If I fail?” and “Why did I play that way?” The most common self-assessments are: “I am the worst,” “I’ll never make it,” “I can’t believe I choked,” and so on. All of these questions are symptoms of anxiety that are born of the ultimate concern, “Where did my zone go?”



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## Zonefulness

### The Big Three of Peak Performance: Powerfully Calm Techniques

#### The Big Three:

1. **Extreme Self-Support (internal strength).**
  - 1a. **Support from family, friends, coaches, and teammates (external strength).**
2. **Personal History of Success (positive focus on past peak performances and outcomes). Magnifying the good!**
3. **Future Memories of Success (positive focus on future peak performances and outcomes). What-willing: "What-will it be like when I succeed?"**

Owen was introduced to The Big Three of Peak Performance when I guided him into the 15 minute zone during his first session. He was able to comfortably explore his Personal History of Success; experience Future Memories of Success; and reconnect with the support he has received from family, friends, coaches, and teammates while focusing on his own capacity to support himself at a higher level.





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## How Zoning Out Triggers Zoning In

Session two began with a discussion of how the zone blockers, notably The Toxic Three, can be utilized as positive triggers to zone in and perform at your best. I explained, "Owen, whenever you find yourself what-ifying, worrying, or beating yourself up, make the problem the solution."

Owen looked at me quizzically as I continued, "Say, 'Thank you what-if, for reminding me, what-will it be like when I play well and hit the ball hard.' 'Thank you what-if, for reminding me to remember my love for the game and my Personal History of Success.' 'Thank you self-criticism, for reminding me to treat myself like I would a teammate or a good friend.'

So, you see, the zone blockers, the symptoms, can actually be used to your advantage. Symptoms make you zone out and play poorly. Now, they really can be incorporated as powerful reminders, to zone in. And remember, the symptoms that take you out of your zone live in your conscious mind, which is extremely small and limited. But your zone lives in your subconscious mind, the place where you can really trust and support yourself, that infinite space that creates calm, confidence, and peak performance."

Finally, I gave an example that I knew would be of personal significance to Owen, a lifelong Phillies fan. It went like this: "I want you to take a moment and remember the little league team you played on at the age of 12. Now, consider that the conscious mind that blocks your zone and creates anxiety is this team." (His team was the Rockets.)

"Just imagine that your subconscious mind is a major league team, let's say the Phillies. Could the Rockets, a bunch of 12-year-olds, ever beat the Philadelphia Phillies?" Owen rolled his eyes and laughed at this ridiculous question. "So, here's the best part of everything we've been talking about: Your subconscious mind, where your zone lives, is the Phillies, and your conscious mind, where the symptoms live, is the Rockets.

The subconscious mind can't ever lose to the conscious mind and I know that you already know that the Phillies would never lose to a little league team. So, your zone is extraordinarily stronger than any worry, why, what-if, or self-criticism. And now these symptoms can trigger your zone!" Owen's comfortably curious look was becoming more and more hopeful.

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## The Art of What-Willing

What-willing is a powerful technique that certainly will dismantle atomic what-ifs. The following chart can serve as a visual imprint, a reminder, to focus on the Future Memories of Success that are triggered by the creative art of what-willing.

### What-Ifing:

- 1) What-If I miss a lay-up?
- 2) What-if I don't get in the game?
- 3) What-if a new recruit beats me out?
- 4) What-if I make an error?
- 5) What-if the God's of soccer decide to ban me for life from the sport?

### What-willing

1. What-will it be like when I drive to the hoop with confidence and finish the shot?
2. What-will it be like when I prepare myself mentally and only focus on what I can control?
3. What-will it be like when I become an expert at accessing and staying in my zone?
4. What-will it be like when I let every pitch be the first pitch?
5. What-will it be like when I imagine myself to be The Ultimate God of Soccer?

What-ifying will keep you stuck. It is not only the world's most debilitating phrase but perpetuates symptoms. It will bounce you back and forth between its friends, why-ning and self-criticism, with great ease as it depletes your energy and spirit.

The answer to the above what-willing questions and, for that matter, to all what-willing questions typically goes something like this:

"It will be great; amazing; awesome; the best; outstanding . . ."

What-willing creates and generates positive emotional and physical energy as it enables Future Memories of Success to materialize in the present.

So what-will it be like when you become a champion, what-willer?



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## Zonefulness: A Case Study

### 5<sup>th</sup> Inning Triumph

A major league baseball player who was mired in a most unusual slump was referred to me. As a first year starting pitcher he was unable to make it through the 5<sup>th</sup> inning of his first five starts of the season. He rapidly developed an irrational belief that he would never again make it through the 5<sup>th</sup> inning.

Interestingly, he pitched extremely well during the first four innings of each game he started. After being unable to survive the 5<sup>th</sup> in his first two starts he began to worry. Specifically, he began to “what-if” about not making it through this most troublesome inning. So, the five days he had to endure between starts became mentally excruciating.

He began obsessively engaging The Toxic Three zone blockers that guarantee poor performance. Variations and combinations of “What- if it happens again?” “What-if I get sent down to Triple-A?” “Why am I playing like this?” “I don’t belong in the big leagues, I’ll never make it, I’m a loser,” played over and over in his conscious, overthinking mind. Unbelievably, he explained that he would actually calculate his earned run average (ERA) rising during the 5<sup>th</sup> inning. He would do this after surrendering runs, prior to the next batter stepping up to the plate.

Now, I already understood that anyone who makes it to “the show,” the big leagues, is a world class athlete. Any major league baseball player is better than 99.9999% of the players in the world. So when he said to me at the outset of our session, “I don’t know what you think you can do, I already know I’ll never make it through the 5<sup>th</sup> inning,” I was prepared.

I continued, “I have a question for you, but I don’t want you to answer it until later in the session. Here goes: ‘What’s so special about the 5<sup>th</sup> inning?’ I promise we’ll come back to it.”

I proceeded to inquire about his Personal History of Success, his ability to support himself and his teammates when having a difficult time, and about his Future Memories of Success. I was highlighting The Big Three techniques that create Peak Performance.

*Personal History of Success: Why-ning (asking, “Why did I play so poorly?”) is used as a positive trigger to magnify your Personal History of Success.*



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I was curious about the road that brought him to the highest level of professional baseball. “So let’s put the stress and pressure aside for just a moment and talk about pure baseball.” I continued with the following questions, “When did you first realize you loved the game? Who were your primary supporters? What are your most meaningful memories of your life in baseball, from little league, and high school, on to the minor leagues?”

Over the next five minutes I learned a great deal about his passion for the game. He told me of “playing from the time I could barely walk with my brothers and dad; the smell of the glove oil I would use to break in a new mitt; the ping of the aluminum bat when I hit home runs; the sound of my mom’s voice cheering me on; the awesome feeling of getting drafted; the party we had when I signed my first contract,” and on and on he went.

I could feel his energy heightening as he reconnected with and detailed his Personal History of Success in baseball. So I said, “Can you tell me about a time, from little league to the present, excluding your past five major league starts, that you did NOT make it through the 5<sup>th</sup> inning?” I fully anticipated that he would remember a few times when he was off his game and was taken out prior to the 5<sup>th</sup> inning. He looked up for a minute and reviewed his career as a pitcher and realized that he could not, amazingly, remember a single time he was removed from a game, on any level, before this season. “So what’s so special about the 5<sup>th</sup> inning? Don’t answer that yet.”

*Extreme Self-Support: Self-criticizing is used as a positive trigger to become Extremely Self-Supportive.*

I then wondered aloud if he had a close friend on the team. After learning that he is extremely close with a fellow pitcher, I asked him how he would support his buddy if the roles were reversed, if he were pitching very well and his friend was convinced that he would never again see the start of the sixth inning. He emphatically responded that he would tell his friend, “You belong here! You destroy hitters! You are the man! I wish I had the nasty stuff you have! I believe in you!”

I commented, “Imagine if you took 20% of the genuine, heartfelt support you have for your friend and applied it to yourself. And, by the way, would you ever advise another pitcher in a slump to beat himself down, to focus on future failure, and, in what universe would you recommend that he calculate his ERA going up while he was still in the game pitching?” I detected a slight smile and a nod of the head.

*Future Memories of Success: What-ifying (What if I fail?) is used as a positive trigger to begin What-willing (What-will it be like when I succeed?).*

I then posed a series of pointed questions, “What-will it be like when every pitch is the first pitch and every inning the first inning? Isn’t every pitch an opportunity to be extremely confident and intense? And, please help me understand what’s so special about the 5<sup>th</sup> inning? I noticed his smile became a bit wider and his head continued nodding in agreement.

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He sat upright in his chair and said, “You know, you’re right, what’s the big deal about the 5<sup>th</sup> inning? It’s just another inning.” We then discussed the philosophy of allowing every pitch to simply be the next pitch, the first pitch. I went on, “Every pitch can be a positive trigger to trust your ability, to really zone in, to be fiercely focused . . . and, by the way, my personal favorite technique is to imagine Future Memories of Success. And you can do that on the mound, seeing and experiencing success right before throwing the pitch, believing that in just a split second you will be achieving your goal. And then you do it again, and again, and again.”

*Peak Performance Zone: This guided zone exercise allows The Big Three (Personal History of Success, Extreme Self-Support, Future Memories of Success) to become your go-to tools that enable intense focus and maximum achievement. Zone exercises in the office and at home serve to dismantle the symptoms that prevent you from accessing and maintaining your real-time performance zone in your sport.*

As he sat comfortably in his chair I continued, “Close your eyes and take five very slow, very deep breaths. A nice way to really absorb yourself is to stare at the inside of your eyes, experiencing the unique light, the colors . . . and I know that your conscious mind may have certain doubts about this process, this exercise, but I also know from my experience that your subconscious mind is already creating and generating sensations of comfort and confidence, visions of your best self really competing, succeeding, and believing in your talents and abilities.

So, why not forget all about trying, and transport yourself back in time, like a bodiless mind, enjoying the process of reviewing your own personal history of playing ball . . . experiencing the sights and sounds of dominating on the mound, the sensations of lightness . . . the smell of the freshly cut grass, the powerfully calm confidence that flowed through you and remains within you.”

I continued guiding him back through his Personal History of Success for five minutes, helping him to reconnect with memories of not only playing great but of loving to play.

The final ten minutes of the guided zone magnified the tools of Extreme Self-Support and Future Memories of Success.

*The outcome: The rookie pitcher went on to pitch four complete games throughout the remainder of the season. He routinely pitched beyond the 5<sup>th</sup> inning. The start after his Zonefulness session he pitched seven innings, gave up two runs, and earned his first major league victory. He was quoted after the game saying, “It’s really about my mental focus. I just tried to take one pitch at a time and do my very best.”*



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## Positive Psychology

I'm extremely interested in what's right with people. I enjoy learning about their past and present achievements while discussing future possibilities and potentials.

Traditional psychological therapy is enamored with figuring out the "why" and labeling people with a diagnosis. It is heavily laden with analysis, testing, and much too frequently reliant on medication. It often is a cumbersome, boring experience that encourages people to believe that they are flawed and in need of long-term therapy.

Positive psychology (specifically solution-oriented and strategic therapy) focuses on the unique strengths of each individual. Zonefulness is a strength-based, future-focused model that empowers student-athletes to access the answers and abilities that they already possess. The peak performance zone that exists inside of each person is loaded with solutions and creative strategies.

Magnifying the past, present, and future good is the foundation of positive psychology. Solution-oriented questions and strategic task assignments will be highlighted in the Zonefulness techniques to follow.

### Solution-Oriented Questions: Personal History of Success

I've asked the following questions of student-athletes over the years to assist them in reconnecting with their Personal History of Success.

- "Tell me about a time you played soccer with extreme confidence?"
- "What would you consider to be the best round of golf you ever played?"
- "When did you realize you loved swimming?"
- "When did you know that the backstroke would be your best event?"
- "How would your favorite coach describe your strengths as a hockey player?"
- "What individual honors have you achieved as a sprinter? What team honors?"
- "How do you feel about yourself after a huge workout in the weight room in preparation for football camp?"
- "What do you enjoy doing after a Friday night hoop victory?"
- "Tell me about your pre-race ritual and how you focus your attention to compete?"



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## **Strategic Assignments: Personal History of Success**

I've given the following homework assignments to student-athletes to assist them in reconnecting with their Personal History of Success.

- "I want you to do a 3 minute or more self-zone tonight focusing on your performance last week when you scored 15 points and had 8 assists. Magnify the feelings, flow, and confidence that you experienced."
- "After listening to your zone recording tonight after dinner, go out back and throw ten fastballs to your dad."
- "Watch your personal highlight film on your laptop tonight. Afterwards, take five deep breaths and enjoy imagining your team winning the lacrosse championship this weekend."
- "Before next session, go to your little brother's soccer game and intently watch the kids who are zoned-in and playing intensely. I'll look forward to hearing what you learned."
- "I know you are leaving campus for a few days and traveling home for Thanksgiving break. While you are home slowly review your dad's scrapbook. Enjoy all of the photos, the newspaper clippings, and the memories. Let yourself reconnect with your history of loving to play tennis and of being a great tennis player. Bring the feelings of confidence and trust in yourself back to campus on Sunday."

The number of solution-oriented questions and strategic assignments are limitless. They are designed based on the unique history and future potential of each student-athlete I train.



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## Positive Psychology

Self-support is the foundation of positive psychology. It is the cornerstone of happiness and emotional well-being. Whether excelling in your sport or winning the game of life, it all begins and ends with self-compassion.

It's been shown that consistently self-critical people have decreased energy, increased mood swings, and great difficulty enjoying life. Self-criticism is, unquestionably, the most damaging of The Toxic Three of Poor Performance.

### Solution-Oriented Questions: Extreme Self-Support

I have asked the following questions of student-athletes to assist them in understanding the extraordinary value of self-support.

- “Who in your family has been extremely supportive of you from when you first began playing soccer?”
- “What coaches have been emotionally supportive and influential in your softball career?”
- “What specific memory do you have of a teammate being there for you and supporting you after a poor performance on the court?”
- “How do you treat a teammate after she makes an error? Tell me about a specific example?”
- “How does it feel when teammates, coaches, and fans cheer you on?”
- “Can you remember a time or times when you were Extremely Self-Supportive after missing multiple foul shots?”
- “Tell me how you can so easily beat yourself up but so readily support teammates when they have an off game? Interesting, isn't it?”

### Strategic Assignments: Extreme Self-Support

The following homework assignments were given to student-athletes to help them generate, maintain, and appreciate Extreme Self-Support:

- “I know your lacrosse coach has a rough way about him. I know that he is very quick to criticize you and rarely acknowledges your performance and your effort. Before bed tonight, I want you to imagine that you are the head coach. How would you communicate with the team? What would you say to validate and support a player

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like you? Remember to close your eyes and take really slow, deep breaths. Experience yourself as the coach for 3 to 5 minutes.”

- “Before field hockey practice tomorrow do a one minute power zone and promise to be unbelievably positive to yourself and your teammates. Remember, if you criticize yourself, use it as a reminder to support yourself like you do everyone else on the team.

This specific assignment generated a terrific response of Extreme Self-Support:

- “I know you have a long bus ride Saturday morning for the 7 p.m. tip-off at the University of Scranton. After listening to your ten minute zone, turn off the recording and imagine—with your eyes still closed—that you are watching a movie.

The lead actor in the movie is a college soccer player who has shifted from being outrageously self-critical his freshman and sophomore years to incredibly self-supportive his junior year.

Watch the movie on the inside of your eyes. Observe his transformation as he lets go of his mistakes and allows every play to be the first play. Visualize and experience his great junior season.

Finally, have fun and be the lead actor in your own movie.”

- “Before your training run today, take one minute and review your personal history of self-doubt and criticism. Then, take at least two minutes and do the opposite. Imagine yourself being overwhelmingly and psychotically self-supportive.

When you begin your run, remain positive and exaggerate being self-supportive. Have fun. Take it to the limit. See how rapidly you can develop a mastery of Extreme Self-Support.



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## **Solution-Oriented Questions: Future Memories of Success**

The questions I ask student-athletes are designed to provide an orientation to the positive future that exists. The following are examples:

- Imagine the lacrosse season is over and you had your best year yet. Look back through the season and review all that you did in practice and in games to play at such a high level. Tell me about how you prepared in practice and competed in the games. What did you achieve individually? What did the team accomplish?
- How will it feel when you achieve your goal of shooting 90% from the foul line this year?
- What will you do differently to set the defensive tone as the starting middle linebacker this season?
- As soccer camp nears what will be new and improved about your mental focus as the returning goalkeeper?
- How will it feel when you approach every swim meet as if it were your last? How will your focus change? How much more energy will you have?

## **Strategic Assignments: Future Memories of Success**

I give homework assignments to student-athletes to show them the possibilities that exist. The following are examples:

- Do a one minute power zone three times a day where you experience yourself on the foul line. Mentally rehearse your pre-shot routine. Create a tunnel vision on the front of the rim. See, feel and hear the free throw swishing through the net.
- While stretching before the next swim meet imagine yourself surpassing your best time in the 100-meter butterfly.
- I know your favorite player is Mike Trout of the Angels. Later tonight, go to YouTube and watch highlights of Mike's best plays in the field. Then study the video of his focus at the plate as he launches line drives and home runs all over the park. Afterwards, close your eyes and imagine your own future highlight film for this upcoming season.
- Pretend field hockey season is over and you performed at an extraordinarily high level throughout the season. Before bed tonight close your eyes and take five deep breaths. Then really enjoy reviewing all that you achieved from the first game of the season through the conference championship. Magnify the sights, sounds, and feelings of your incredible season.
- Ask yourself, every day, "What-will it be like when I'm the starting midfielder this season. I know you know the answer is, 'It will be awesome!'" Ask yourself this question all the time until you are named the starter.



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## Just Like Carli Lloyd

### July 5, 2015

The United States women's national soccer team defeated Japan 5-2 to win the World Cup, a triumphant performance that was seen by 25.4 million viewers on American television. The size of the audience is a record for any men's or women's soccer game watched in this country.

This extraordinary number of American soccer fans gratefully joined the massive amount of international soccer loyalists to witness one United States player experience her most vivid of dreams materialize on the world's biggest stage.

Just about two months before the championship game, during an intense training session, Carli Lloyd imagined herself having what can only be described as an unimaginable performance in the World Cup finale.

"It's kind of funny, I'm running and I'm doing sprints and it's hard, it's burning, and I completely zoned out. I dreamed of and visualized playing in the World Cup final and visualized scoring four goals.

It sounds pretty funny, but that's what it's all about. I think at the end of the day you can be physically strong, you can have all the tools out there, but if your mental state isn't good enough, you can't bring yourself to bigger and better things. And for me, I've just constantly been visualizing, constantly been growing confidence with each and every game. I was on a mission."

Believe it or not, Carli scored three goals in the first 16 minutes of the contest as the American women never looked back on their way to a dominant World Cup victory.

Incredibly, Carli barely missed scoring another goal during her epic opening to the game. Her header, from point blank range, was directed just wide by a couple of feet. Her dream, with clear visions of scoring four goals, came ever so close to happening.

Carli Lloyd practices her zone. She takes great pride in mental strength training and has demonstrated her capacity to elicit her peak performance zone anywhere and at any time.

She meditates routinely, takes a ten minute run prior to each match to daydream and visualize playing at her best, possesses great pride in her work ethic, and feels an intense sense of gratitude for her opportunity to play the game she loves.

Carli was awarded the Golden Ball trophy as the Most Valuable Player of the 2015 Women's World Cup. She described her zone beautifully when she said, "I feel like I blacked out in the first 30 minutes or so . . . it's just crazy and unbelievable!"