

Welcome To The
ZONE

Peak Performance Redefined

Scott Ford

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Peak Performance Redefined
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Foreword

By David W. Smith

The concept of helping players reach their potential is a lofty goal for any instructor. Because true player-potential is defined by so many intrinsic and extrinsic factors, a tennis player must look beyond the idiosyncrasies of stroke technique and methodology to achieve personal success and move closer to their true playing potential. Likewise, instructors must be in tune with the best patterns that move players forward in progressive improvement.

This is where Scott Ford's book, "Welcome to the Zone," fills the often common void that ties technical aspects of tennis with the patterns associated with the mental processes that players need to master for ultimate success.

The Parallel Mode Process that Scott Ford has developed and tested is truly a practical means to maximize performance in both achieving higher levels of stroke production as well as competing at optimal levels. In my 35 years of teaching tennis I've never had a process that is not only effective for ALL levels of players, but one that is an easily achievable method to understand and apply by all students. The steps which Scott outlines in this book will indeed have a profound effect on players as they train, as they practice, and as they compete.

I encourage every player—and coach—to study the tenants that Scott has detailed and prescribed within these pages. Through his insatiable thirst for developing championship competitors, Scott has diligently pursued higher consciousness as well as on-court evaluation to

the point that such advice is pure performance magic!

I have used his Parallel Mode Process in nearly every lesson over the past eight years since I first learned these patterns and tools from Scott. I've seen the advantages such insights have provided my students on the learning court. But, perhaps more enlightening, I've witnessed the response of students who employ these same methods in competitive play. Such responses have been resounding...if not literally enlightening for so many.

Give this information the attention it deserves. You certainly won't regret the time spent. And you WILL certainly see the results in your game.

David W. Smith

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Preface: A Different Tennis Journey

“The accidental reveals man.”

– Pablo Picasso

My journey into the zone began quite by accident. In 1978, while hitting with a psychologist friend of mine, I did something on the tennis court that caused me to go into the zone. The zone is a colloquial term for the human peak performance experience, also referred to as a “flow state.” I was completely surprised when it happened because I had never before been able to play tennis in the zone on purpose. When I did get into the zone, which was occasionally, it always seemed to happen by chance, not choice. As if the zone had a mind of its own and I had no say in the matter.

But on that particular day, for some reason, this childlike, imaginary thing I was doing was causing me to go into the zone every time I did it. My friend immediately noticed the difference.

“What just happened to you?” he asked.

So I showed him what I was doing and he tried it. To my surprise, he, too, started playing tennis in the zone! The level of his performance instantly skyrocketed and we both started playing at our highest level. When we finished I asked him what he thought had happened. He said he wasn’t sure, but he had some books on human consciousness that might help explain this magical phenomenon.

That same day I started to study the zone, and along with being

able to study the zone from the outside by reading about it, I found that I could also study the zone from the inside by doing it. It made sense to me that the best way to understand an experience was through experiencing it firsthand, so I kept putting myself in the zone using this accidental technique I had chanced upon, and by experiencing this peak performance state day after day, I was able to make observations I could not make from outside the experience.

As I shared these observations with other players, I noticed them looking at me like I was off my rocker. But when they tried it, they also went into the zone. It was like watching people going through a series of "Aha!" experiences right in front of my eyes. Obviously, the most noticeable difference was the heightened level of performance they experienced when they went into the zone, but there was something else happening that was deeper than the improvement in performance. Something was happening to them, and me, at a core level. I couldn't explain it, but I knew that this experience was the essence of the game. As Billie Jean King once said about playing tennis in the zone, "this is what the game is all about."

Little did I know at the time that being in the zone is not only what the game of tennis is all about, but that being in the zone is also what the game of life is all about.

As strange as that sounded to me at first, when I looked at the bigger picture, I found that the game of tennis and the game of life had more than a few metaphorical similarities. I started looking at the competitions I faced every day of my life. I looked at the challenges, the problem-solving and decision-making situations I encountered daily. I started seeing tennis as a revved-up version of life. All the physical components were there, just like life. The emotional and mental components were there as well. And, as I was finding out, when I was in the zone, I sensed a spiritual component that was absent in my normal performance state.

Introduction: Playing Tennis In The Zone

Key Subjects:

I.1: A Brief Look at the Zone

I.2: Is this Book for You?

I.3: What To Expect

I.4: Steps

I.5: Support

I.1: A Brief Look at the Zone

The zone goes by different names. It's known as a peak performance experience. It's also called a flow experience. In Zen its called satori, an awakening. In Greece, the athletes of the Ancient Olympiad called it arete, meaning excellence in all things. But whatever you want to call it, if you have experienced the zone in any sport, you will remember it. You will remember:

- The effortless ease with which you played the game.
- How everything came together.
- How every aspect of your game started working.
- How you didn't think, you just performed.
- It was like going on automatic pilot.

At long last, you were playing the game the way you knew you could play the game:

- Your concentration was total, your focus absolute.
- You saw the ball more clearly than ever before.
- Sometimes it appeared to move in slow motion.
- You felt a sense of power and control, like you were in charge, not your opponent. In fact, you hardly noticed your opponent at all.
- You lost track of time. What seemed like minutes turned out to be an hour.
- Your reflexes were quicker, your reactions faster.

Best of all, you thoroughly enjoyed what you were doing. Winning and losing played no part in your thinking. You had a great time just playing the game. One you would remember long after the match ended.

Welcome to playing tennis “in the zone.”

The next time you went out to play, however, no matter how hard you tried to reproduce the zone, you couldn’t do it. Your game returned to normal:

- Your strokes were the same as always.
- The flow was gone.
- The automatic pilot was gone.
- Your concentration wavered.
- Your focus was confused.
- The ball seemed to be moving faster.
- Your opponent seemed more talented.

Where is all the control and power you felt before? What happened to those quick reflexes, that speedy reaction time? Why is the match taking so long? Where’s the enjoyment? Where’s the fun? Where’s the zone?

Welcome back to playing tennis “in the norm.”

Why is it that you were in the zone one day and in the norm the next? What were you doing differently when you were in the zone? You're the same person, with the same physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual make up. So, why is it that one day you were in the zone and the next day you weren't? What makes playing in the zone so elusive? Why is the zone such a mystery?

Modern sport psychology suggests that the door to the zone is opened when certain higher-order behavioral and environmental components are brought together simultaneously. These are called "flow components." However, there is no guarantee that synthesizing these flow components will cause the zone to happen. It will only set the stage for the possible occurrence of the zone - maybe.

In short, the general consensus is that the zone cannot be manufactured through some generic formula for peak performance. The zone can't be switched on and off at will.

My playing and teaching experiences over the past four decades suggest a completely different perspective. A perspective in which you absolutely can switch the zone on and off at will, and that there is, indeed, a generic formula for this higher-order peak performance state.

This book outlines that formula. It is a step-by-step process for learning:

- How to get into the zone.
- How to maintain the zone.
- How to compete in the zone.

This learning process doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and practice, just like anything else. If you are only interested in the outcome and winning is all that matters, then this book is probably not for you. Although you will find that you win more often when you are playing tennis in the zone than when you are playing tennis in the norm.

But this book is not about winning and losing. It's about the human operating system performing on the tennis court in its highest-order performance state. When you perform in your peak performance state, winning and losing are secondary. What matters most is that you have taken part in something very special between you and the game of tennis.

Along the way, not only will you experience a different view of what the game is all about, you will also get the rare opportunity to experience a different view of what you are all about as a human being.

1.2: Is this Book for You?

Do you ever feel:

- Lost out there on the court?
- Like nothing you are doing is working?
- Like your opponent is in control, not you?
- Like the ball isn't going where you want it to go?
- Or that you just can't put all the pieces of your game together?

If so, then this book is for you.

Do you ever feel:

- Like your game is in a rut?
- Like you are spinning your tennis wheels, practicing but not improving as rapidly as you think you should improve?
- Like your game is played between narrow margins separating the good days from the bad days and you seldom, if ever, experience the great days?
- Do you change teaching pros frequently in the hopes that a

new pro will be the answer to your problems?

- How about a change in racquets or shoes or grips?
- Maybe your strings are too loose. Maybe they're too tight.

If these changes aren't helping your game, then this book is for you.

Playing tennis in the zone is not about the stroking techniques you learned from your last teaching pro. Playing in the zone is not about the strategies you learned from watching professional tennis. The zone has nothing to do with racquets or shoes or string tension. The zone is about the human operating system, not the tools with which it operates. If you are interested in your own operating system and how it can work more efficiently and more accurately on the tennis court, then this book is for you.

We tend to change everything we can possibly change in an effort to achieve a higher level of performance. But what we don't change is the one thing that is truly causal to performance improvement, and that is to change the basic way we use our eye/brain/body operating system on the tennis court; to change the way we use the underlying Input, Processing, Output (IPO) dynamics of our sensorimotor operating system.

In other words, by improving the way your operating system interfaces with the tennis environment, you will improve your performance on the court. This book will show you how to improve the interface between your operating system and the tennis environment in which you operate.

1.3: What To Expect

Learning to play tennis in the zone is an adventure that is empowering as well as frustrating, enjoyable as well as maddening. The main challenge in learning how to play tennis in the zone has nothing to do with tennis. Rather, it deals with the process of change at the most

fundamental of human levels: the human operating system and the core changes to your physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual behaviors brought about by a higher-order interface with the tennis environment. At first, you can expect to experience confusion, disbelief, loss, grief, and anger. Sounds like fun; doesn't it? Not exactly what you had in mind for a peak experience, right? But that's the downside of learning anything involving change:

- It can be discouraging.
- The downside tells you to quit.
- The old way is easier.
- The old way works just fine.
- I can't make these changes.
- It's too hard, too demanding, too different.

So you can expect to experience a downside. But there is also an upside. And if you don't give up on your ability to control your own operating system, you will get to experience the upside of playing tennis in the zone.

- You will experience what it's like to play in your most efficient and accurate operating mode.
- You will experience what it's like to form a one-to-one relationship with the game of tennis. And that one-to-one relationship with the game is an experience you will soon come to treasure.

There is, however, a fundamental sacrifice you must make in order to play tennis in the zone. Simply put, you have to give up playing tennis in the norm. This doesn't mean you will forget how to play tennis. It just means that in order to engage your operating system in its peak

performance state, you must first disengage it from its normal performance state. You must detach from playing tennis in the norm, and detaching from your normal performance state means you must also detach from your normal behavioral state. That detachment will not come easily at first.

Expect to be separated from your comfort zone. Playing in the zone does not mean playing in your “comfort zone.” On the contrary, you should expect the unexpected. You must be willing to venture into the unknown, and that means one thing will surely happen: you will experience fear – the fear of the unknown. Expect it.

In large part, this book is about confronting your own fears. Fear of failure, fear of success, fear of change. These fears are present in all of us, and if you want to switch from playing tennis in the norm to playing tennis in the zone, you will have to confront your fears. So, expect confrontation.

Expect failure. Failure is part of growth and development. You had failures when you were learning to play tennis in the norm, right? Why would you expect anything different when you are learning to play tennis in the zone? No one learns how to play tennis in the zone without experiencing failures. Yet, even knowing this, I’ve had players come out for one lesson, get into the zone and say, “Okay, I’ve got it now,” then lose it shortly thereafter, give up, and return to the narrow margins of their normal performance state. Had they given up that soon after a failure at playing in the norm, they might have given up the game of tennis altogether.

There is no reason to give up after a failure at playing in the zone. It’s like giving up on your peak performance state just because you weren’t perfect the first time. You must expect failure. Allow failure. Failure is necessary for success. It must not be feared, but rather welcomed as integral to the process of change.

Expect, also, success - unimaginable success. The success you

experienced on those rare occasions when you found yourself inexplicably in the zone. As you go through the steps in this book, you will start to understand what causes you to enter the zone, and you will begin to reproduce and maintain your peak performance state for longer periods of time. Expect it; expect success. It, too, is an integral part of the process of change, and much easier to welcome than failure.

There are other changes waiting for you when you start playing tennis in the zone, but for the most part you can expect the experience to feel distinctly different. Playing tennis in the zone is not the same as playing tennis in the norm. Your peak performance state is not the same as your normal performance state, and when you change to your peak performance state, you get a simultaneous change in your overall behavioral state.

So you can expect:

- A different physical experience;
- A different emotional experience;
- A different mental experience;
- A different spiritual experience.

I.4: The Steps

Learning to play tennis in the zone can only be done experientially. Reading about the zone is not the same as being in the zone. With your peak performance state, you learn by doing. You have to practice being in the zone, and that practice starts with easy exercises that progress into more challenging experiences with your peak performance state.

Throughout this book there are specific on-court exercises, *steps* designed to put you in the zone, which means they are guaranteed to take

you out of your comfort zone. They will seem illogical at first. That's what should happen. Remember, playing tennis in the zone will not feel the same as playing tennis in the norm. If you feel normal doing these exercises, then you're not doing them properly. If, however, you feel a little strange during the process, then relax, you're right on track. By definition, playing tennis in the zone is out of the ordinary. Also out of the ordinary are the steps you will go through to make the switch from your normal performance state to your peak performance state.

The steps in each chapter will take you deeper into the zone, each step building on the previous one. You should experience each of these steps fully before moving to the next. Their sequence will allow you to experience deeper changes in your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual behaviors.

Detaching from your normal behavioral state and connecting with your peak behavioral state is necessary for playing any sport in the zone. Tennis just happens to be one of the templates upon which you can experience these peak or flow behaviors. If you do these steps in order, each one will reveal more of the core behavioral changes that are occurring in your game. These changes will occur over time, some faster than others. You will soon come to recognize the higher-order flow behaviors that accompany your peak performance state. As you become more aware of these changes, you will also begin to recognize that there is much more to the game of tennis than you ever before imagined.

In moving through the steps, there will not only be physical changes occurring in the efficiency and accuracy of your game, but you will also experience a growing ability to control your emotions and get off the roller-coaster ride of emotional instability. Mentally, you will find yourself changing from a player who is constantly fighting with distractions and concentrative lapses, to a player who knows exactly how to focus and, more importantly, on what to focus exactly. Finally, you will awaken the most mysterious and misunderstood dimension of your

game; you will awaken the dimension of your game left dormant and undeveloped. The dimension of your game you never talk about - the spiritual dimension. You know it's there; you're just not sure how to get to it. These steps will show you how to experience the spiritual dimension of tennis.

Other components of the zone experience will also become more obvious as you go through the steps in this book. They will be discussed in each chapter, and it is suggested that you discuss them further with your practice partner or practice group. To be fully understood, these changes need to be talked about and shared. Different perspectives will arise in your discussions, and you will often find answers to your questions in the views of others.

I.5: Support

Whenever we undertake major changes in our lives, we often seek out the support of friends or counselors. Support systems are everywhere in western society, ranging from colleagues to parents, friends to partners. The local phone book contains support groups of every conceivable flavor. Support systems are invaluable in the process of change, any change, and it's no different when you are changing from playing tennis in the norm to playing tennis in the zone. Like anything else, it's hard to change in the vacuum of isolation, so I always suggest to my students that they find a willing practice partner with whom they can practice the steps in each chapter.

Better yet, if your practice partner also wants to learn how to play tennis in the zone, then you've got a built-in support system. It always helps if you practice with someone who understands the changes you are going through. How better than to find someone willing to make the changes with you?