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"When you're hot, you're hot," so the song goes. And any sports fan or participant would agree. In almost every athletic event there seems to come that time when a player or team "catches fire" and does everything right. When this happens, we say the player or team has "got momentum."

But what is momentum? How does it start? Why does it stop? Do people develop or lose momentum during their everyday lives?

Peter and Patricia Adler, a husband and wife team of doctoral students in sociology at the University of California, San Diego have been studying the role momentum plays in sports and everyday life, and plan to publish their findings in the journal "Urban Life" in the next few months.

"Athletics is the most visible area where changes in momentum can be seen," say the Adlers. "Anyone who has watched or played in a football, basketball or baseball game can recall certain moments when the momentum seemed to shift in favor of one team or the other.

"This shift can be triggered by any number of things such as a lucky bounce of the ball, a penalty, a mistake by the other team or a truly outstanding play. A certain momentum can sometimes be felt before a game as players try to 'psych' each other up or 'psych' the other team out."

The Adlers feel that many of the components which determine the ebb and flow of momentum in a game are also present for individuals in their everyday life.

"Whether it be in sports, the ivory tower, or the proverbial rat race, variations exist in our capacities to undertake and accomplish tasks. We function more smoothly and efficiently in some conditions than others. This also fluctuates individually, some persons rising to great momentum naturally while others work best under pressure.

"And yet, it is ironic to note how few people are consciously aware of momentum in their everyday lives and how it can be manipulated to their advantage," say the Adlers. "We all experience streaks and slumps without actively reflecting on how to maintain the former and 'break' the latter."

To gather their data on momentum the couple spent many hours observing sporting events as well as conducting interviews with professional athletes, including several members of the San Diego Padres baseball team and players from visiting teams. They also relied upon their own experiences in athletic competition and upon first-person written accounts by well-known athletes.

What sorts of factors can trigger momentum for a team?

What the Adlers call a "charismatic play" such as a dramatic dunk shot in basketball or a clutch home run in baseball can function as a catalyst to speed up the tempo of the game and give impetus to one side.

"Taking a chance can often jar a team into momentum. A play that goes against the book, something daringly unexpected, may precipitate a surge. The move need not be successful to have this effect.

"Conversely, if the adversary has a good chance to score or win, but fails to do so, the momentum may reverse by default."

Creating a scene, such as an elaborate protest over an umpire's ruling, or starting a fight can also serve to create momentum, say the Adlers.

Time, or the shortage of it, can often stimulate a team to get moving and spark that super-level of play in the final minutes.

The fans can also play an important role in developing momentum, according to the Adlers.

"With the cheerleaders screaming, organ and trumpet sounding 'charge' or the fans clapping rhythmically and yelling 'dee-fense, dee-fense,' the players are inspired to greater heights.

"Once the impetus has been created what has actually been 'achieved? The team or player is 'in the groove,' the vibes' are right and everyone moves fluidly. All at once you can't miss that strike zone, there is a 'magic rainbow' between your fingers and the basketball hoop."

The Adlers say that to keep the momentum going it is important to recognize such factors as "coming through in the clutch," capitalizing on opponents' mistakes, and learning to "psych" the opposition.

"An important dimension of 'psych' is learning to display or mask the emotions. Varying with the individual's style, he must decide whether he has more to gain by accentuating or hiding his excitement.

"Many players feel it's to their advantage to cultivate the appearance of 'cool,' to appear emotionless even in the most tense and critical moments of the game."

Just as certain events can spark momentum, others can just as quickly destroy it.

"Two of momentum's chief nemeses are interruption and intrusion," the Adlers say. "Anything that disturbs the rhythm and tempo of the game can reverse the pace and advantage."

These might include delays in the game because of weather, player injury, fan misbehavior or equipment malfunction.

"A team or player may intentionally switch their rhythm and style of play and thus lose their momentum. This may occur when a team is leading and tries not to run up the score to embarrass their opponent or when it is trying to 'run out the clock.'"

The Adlers note that shifts in momentum can be seasonal, changing over periods of days or months as well as during the contest itself.

The momentum of sports can extend beyond the playing field itself to encompass whole cities or states.

"The ultimate climax to the seasonal momentum build up is 'pennant fever,'" say the Adlers. "Peak experiences for the fan, an entire city or nation can be consumed in the excitement and cohesiveness incited by sporting

races. Total strangers talk to one another on the streets, disinterested citizens become active fans, class and race barriers are broken, everyone discussing the various projections and outcomes of games past, present and future. And when the final game of the season ends, bedlam ensues.

"Daily lives of the fans can fluctuate according to the turns and outcomes of games, and when the season ends a void like no other is created."

The parallels between momentum in sports and everyday life are obvious. Just as on the athletic field, daily life can be a series of lucky breaks, outstanding efforts, unwanted delays and untimely injuries or setbacks.

"Why," the Adlers ask, "do people often fail to take advantage of momentum in their daily lives the way athletes do in sporting events?"

"Certainly the inertia principle operates here," they say, "serving to defray eagerness for accelerating one's rhythm. We do not consistently strive for peak performances in life as in game play. This is partly because life is a 24-hour experience, surpassing the temporary duration of sporting events.

"At some point we have all undergone and recognized that 'spark,' that surge of energy and capacity where the tempo and pace of our inner selves changes and we become capable of grasping for those 'magic moments.'

"Just as in sports, being in the groove of life is like being inside of a spell; you can take chances and pull off long shots which ordinarily might not be accomplishable."

The Adlers conclude that "momentum is a neglected sociological dimension which has genuine existence and influence on the world. More research would be beneficial to determine the extent to which momentum is an instinctual and innate component of man's biological makeup.

"The present study has applied the notion of momentum to one substantive area (sports), but it could equally well handle others, on all levels of analysis.'

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