

10 YEARS AFTER: RETHINKING THE PEAK PERFORMANCE PARADIGM

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For a decade Impact Magazine has been reflecting the times and trends in the fitness industry and the readership it serves. We have seen changes in styles of workouts, fitness routines, and even the entire concept of health in the body-mind connection. Even the ethos of all-out effort in the peak performance paradigm is a subject worthy of a careful second look through the lens of sustainable quality living.

How we treat our bodies will increasingly affect how we can enjoy life.

Modern Living. The concept of Impact Magazine arose in the modern era of the last millenium. Born of youthful exuberance, it reflected a time of optimism and excitement, when technology and modern science would repair and ultimately cure all the ills of humankind. It was a time when the emphasis was largely on peak performance, developing and exploiting every skill, ability, and capacity to achieve the all-important winning edge. Being strong and competitive in a stressful right-sizing business environment raised the requirements of physical and mental fitness in the corporate world. Resources needed to be used and exploited to stay productive and competitive. Being “on” and productive and ready to give your peak productive and creative output on demand meant there was little time or energy over left to merely enjoy yourself and your loved ones. Was this the Utopia that modern living promised, but ultimately, could not deliver?

The cutting edge of anxiety, productivity, and cost effectiveness was also slicing into the corporate fitness world. While companies were saying “our employees are our most important resource” they were cutting costs, closing and outsourcing fitness and daycare facilities, and shrinking subsidies for health and fitness activities.

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Also in the fitness industry, corresponding trends emphasized pushing our bodies to the ultimate. Aerobic workouts were standardized, vigorous, dance-till-you-drop, “C’mon everybody, you can do it, 5 and 4 and 3 and 2 and 1, good, now let’s do the other side...” routines. Group pressure and staying competitive kept many people locked into regimes that were exhausting and not ultimately personally satisfying. In the world of athletic competition, there was often pressure to work out or train to the point of certainly depletion and often exhaustion. “Oh well, no pain, no gain” was a familiar refrain to accompany the strain of the ultimate push for supposed excellence. But what was this ethos of peak performance, and what was its cost and benefit for the non-elite amateur athlete?

The Peak Performance Paradigm. The concept of peak performance as a way of thinking is that you should train to the maximum to be ready to perform to the ultimate. The goal in life is to achieve the ultimate high of being all that you can be. No positive potential should be left undeveloped or unexploited. If we all live up to our potential, this will be a maximally developed world, where our creative actualization will surpass and thus solve all of life’s problems. This philosophy applies well in a win-lose model of competition where winner takes all, silver and bronze medallists are rarely mentioned and hardly remembered, and the vast majority of participants are outside the celebrity winners’ circle. It is not quite as enjoyable for the vast majority of athletes and people in general.

Not Sustainable and Not Much Fun. This ethos is fundamentally flawed. It is not sustainable, even for the most elite of athletes. Ask Tiger Woods about his golf game lately. Fundamentally, peak performance is by definition a statistical anomaly. It is an extreme deviation from the mean, and by definition cannot be sustainable. The harder you try to push the rope, the more it bends. Secondly, we know from the National Coaching Certification Program Level IV syllabus that peaking in amateur sport cannot realistically occur more than 3 times a year, including one major peak. What about feeling happy about working out the other 361 days of the year? Thirdly, most of the rewards and glory of success are based on the win-lose paradigm of competition, rather than the win-win paradigm of cooperation, in which there are multiple winners in shared accomplishments of participation. Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly for our individualistic society, there are options for individually tailored fitness solutions that are enjoyable by every individual as they participate in the fitness dance in their own way.

Shifting our thinking: **Toward the Optimal Performance Paradigm.** The concept of optimal performance states that people can enable their performance at a consistently high level of functioning by genuinely enjoying the process rather than exclusively focusing on the outcome of human fitness activities. This paradigm is sustainable because its essence is inherently fun, resulting in a greater ability to do your work and also your leisure activities, even if they are quite demanding. Because it is based on cooperation rather than competition, workout partners and routines are now selected on the basis of rhythmic patterns rather than pure superiority in

open-form competition. This does not mean that open-form competition is shunned. Every once in a while you need to know where you stand where the rubber meets the road. However, this becomes background; process assumes the position of focus. The form itself becomes the object of desire, and passion to attain this form becomes the path to personal fulfillment.

In the fitness industry, this shift is reflected in individually-centered fitness routines emphasizing functionality and suitability to helping individuals attain levels of fitness that suit their ages and life situations that they frequently encounter in their business and personal environments. For example, there are now fitness and training courses oriented to improving golf or skiing; also there are flexibility and inner core strengthening classes geared to occupationally immobilized desk jockeys and computer nerds.

Perhaps, more than anything, changes in the health and fitness industry in the last decade have shown a flexibility to be consumer-driven and oriented to sustainable Optimal Performance goals. This means an increasing emphasis on individualized process-specific programs aimed at relieving stress, increasing meditation, enjoyment, and function in daily living, including even vigorous recreation. Informed consumers of fitness now ask for the kinds of environments and experiences that are likely to promote their natural enjoyment, and ultimately, their sustained dedication to activities that define their quality of life

The kind of thinking in the post-modern era is perhaps less prescriptive, less sure that its ideas will prevail. However, as we become less a consumer society oriented toward growth and expansion at all costs, and more a conserver society living within our means, the elegance of less-is-better can have more mass appeal in our society than it did a mere decade ago. The Optimal Performance Paradigm reflects that movement in society in general, and the fitness world as its reflection.

Over the past ten years it has been pleasant to watch the sifting sands of the trends that determine Quality in the fitness industry. It is even more satisfying to be involved in their collective Impact on our health-promoting society.

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Contributors

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