

# The Effects of Flow on Differing Levels of Athletic Commitment

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**ABSTRACT:** Commitment is essential to success in any field, especially athletics. My research measures the effects of flow experiences on sport enjoyment and social support, two constructs in the Sport Commitment Model (SCM). Structured interviews are also used to examine grit as a possible addition to the SCM. Self-perceived dispositional awareness and the quantity of flow states are analyzed using the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale. Qualitative and quantitative data from structured interviews, including ranking scales, are analyzed, comparing women's scholastic, club, and collegiate soccer levels. Those who report a greater number of flow experiences are expected to show greater commitment to soccer and experience more sport enjoyment and social support than those who do not. Athletes possessing higher dispositional awareness scores should report more flow state experiences. The findings will help to understand athletes' commitment at different levels of performance, holding implications in coaching methods and recruiting.

## INTRODUCTION:

- There exists a relationship between sport enjoyment and commitment as well as social support and commitment in elite athletes found in the Sport Commitment Model (SCM). (Scanlan, 2003).
- Flow has been associated with sport enjoyment in elite athletes. (Scanlan, 2003).
  - Csikszentmihalyi coined the term flow, defining it as a state in which one is, "so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." (Csikszentmihalyi, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, 4).
  - Flow is also described as the balance between an individual's skill and the challenge of an activity.

• Flow and commitment have been researched separately in elite athletes, with little to no difference in commitment levels. Flow level has been related to constructs that make up commitment but needs to be explicitly tested in relationship to enjoyment and social support as well as directly to flow.

- Flow has not been looked at in relation to separate dispositional traits. General awareness may relate to flow experiences.
- Grit has yet to be tested as an addition to the SCM. It may have a relationship to commitment.

## What is the relationship between flow experiences and different levels of commitment?

## METHODS:

The interview began with the participant writing down answers to background questions including level of experience and time commitment to soccer. Participants were also asked to share how they divide the time they spend on soccer, or how many hours a week they spend on certain soccer-related activities, such as practicing on her own or practicing with her team. Participants were then **interviewed for 40 - 50 minutes**.

Sections included: commitment, flow sport enjoyment, social support, and grit. Participants were given a **definition** each section's concept and then asked if they agreed and/or could add anything to the definition. Qualitative data was collected from this.

Each topic definition followed with a question regarding the athlete's experience with topic in relation to or if the athlete felt the topic relates to flow. The answer '**yes**' or '**no**' was marked down to provide more quantitative data.

Next the participant rates the concepts' importance to the athletes' flow or commitment to soccer on a **scale of 1 to 5**. Here, the participant was given the interview packet to circle the number on the scale. All interviews and surveys were kept anonymous, as interviews were not recorded. A code with a number instead of names was implemented.

## WHAT is Flow?

Csikszentmihalyi's 8 Aspects of Flow

1. Clear goals: an objective is distinctly defined; immediate feedback: one knows instantly how well one is doing.
2. The opportunities for acting decisively are relatively high, and they are matched by one's perceived ability to act. In other words, personal skills are well suited to given challenges.
3. Action and awareness merge; on-pointedness of mind.
4. Concentration on the task at hand; irrelevant stimuli disappear from consciousness, worries and concerns are temporarily suspended.
5. A sense of potential control.
6. Loss of self-consciousness, transcendence of ego boundaries, a sense of growth and of being part of some greater entity.
7. Altered sense of time, which usually seems to pass faster.
8. Experience becomes autotelic: If several of the previous conditions are present, what one does becomes autotelic, or worth doing for its own sake.

(Csikszentmihalyi The Evolving Self, 178).

## WHEN does flow occur?

- Flow becomes possible when activities are both 'problematic yet resolvable' so that the participants' skills are challenged. As skill improves achieving flow requires taking on increasingly greater challenges.
  - Csikszentmihalyi researches the structure rather than the content of such experiences. Since one may derive a sense of flow from play, creative experiences, and work, it is more important to study how the experience takes place rather than what the experience happens to be.
  - Although flow may be achieved during a variety of different activities, Csikszentmihalyi has explained that it is achieved at micro or macro levels. The micro level refers to experiencing flow during everyday activities, while the latter refers to experience during more demanding

Supplementary Table 1:  
Table 1: Summary of Qualitative Codes

Topic	Code Categories
General Commitment	Showing up / Time Investment
	Effort / Enjoying Soccer
Commitment and Performance	Time Investment Changes
	Energy / Attitude Physical Performance: Skills/Shape
General Experience of Flow	High Energy and Positive Outlook
	Focus
Specific Experience of Flow	Personal High Energy and Positive Outlook
	High Performance when Anticipating / in Rhythm
Enjoyment and Flow	Personal Skill Meets Challenge
General Social Support	Feeding off Teammates
	Friends and Family Outside Soccer. Mix of Both Soccer and Outside Soccer Support
	Teammates and Coaches.
Social Support and Flow	Feedback Pumps Up, More Confident Positive Energy and Outlook for Team
	Tune Out Social Support While Playing
Recognizing Grit In Self and Others	Keep trying, even after failure.
	More effort in general.

## Long-term (measured in years) and Current (hours per week) Commitment

Participant	Years	Hours / Week	Competition Level
1*	14	20	Varsity
2*	16	20	Varsity
3	18	8	Club
4	15	6	Club
5	16	5	Club
6	7	10	High School
7*	10	10	High School
8	9	12	High School
9	11	21	High School
10	7	10	High School
11	8	12	High School
12*	10	12	High School
13*	14	21	High School
14	11	8	Club
15	10	6	Club
16	17	8	Club

Highlight	Commitment Level
Grey Highlight	High
No Highlight	Low

\*Participants with the same level of long-term and current commitment (5/16 = 31.25%)

**RESULTS:** The object of this study was to analyze the relationship between flow experiences and commitment.

•Most participants said they were committed and agreed on how commitment was seen in others and put forth by them.

•Enjoyment, social support, grit, as well as performance were viewed by all participants as relating to commitment. This means that grit tested positively as an addition to previous commitment models

•There was little difference between any participants in experiencing flow. Performance was seen to be impacted by commitment as well.

•Though the majority of all participants scored high on flow, the different levels of commitment described the topic in different ways. The relation of flow to the participant's enjoyment of soccer was established by most, so it follows that those scoring high levels all tended to have high enjoyment as well.

•Those with high flow actually had *low* social support followed by perception it as having low impact on flow states. Those with low flow were more prone to support's impact and affected mostly by teammates. Interaction with the team while in flow was the most common interaction with social support during flow. No matter what commitment level, grit was viewed part of participants soccer experience just as flow was.

**•The relationship between dispositional awareness and flow was the only significant quantitative relationship of those analyzed.**

## Characterizing Flow

14. Top three aspects of flow		
Categories (Participants chose the top 3 aspects of flow they experienced most out of the nine)	Frequency	%
1. Knowing what I am doing. (goals)	3	18.75%
2. Really locked in. (concentration and focus)	11	68.75%
3. Forgetting myself. (action blends with awareness)	3	18.75%
4. Time goes by quickly without thinking of it.	6	37.50%
5. Able to make adjustments quickly and smoothly. (feedback)	6	37.50%
6. Playing is challenging yet effortless. (playing isn't too hard or too easy)	4	25.00%
7. Feel in control. (of the situation)	7	43.75%
8. Having fun; enjoying playing.	6	37.50%
9. Focused on the process of playing soccer. (on the activity)	2	12.50%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>48</b>	

**CONCLUSIONS:** Overall, due to the fact that most participants scored on high flow, despite commitment levels, not significant relationship can be determined between flow and commitment levels. Qualitative data shows how athletes vary in their experience of flow when quantitative data shows that they experience the same amount of it (Table 1). This study rounds out previous studies looking at flow and dispositional tendency towards it in that a direct relation between a separate measure of general awareness relates significantly to flow.

The participants in this study reported flow, sport enjoyment, social support, as relating to commitment. This supports Scanlan's results from the Sport Commitment Model. Similar to the way elite athletes agreed on constructs of commitment, the lower performance athletes of this study agreed that these same topics related to them, their commitment, and their flow experience.

The most important implications of this study come from the relationship of dispositional awareness and especially grit. Structured interviews were also used to examine grit as a possible addition to the SCM. Since subjects agreed that grit related to their commitment, the construct has passed a general test of addition to the SCM. Further tests could confirm this and compare how it fares in relation to the other SCM constructs.