

# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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## Ah, to Be “In the Zone”

Magic Johnson, the great professional basketball player, marveled at the intuitive, almost telepathic nature of his relationship on the court with his teammate James Worthy: “It’s like we have ESPN,” he said.

The TV sports colossus aside, there is something extra-sensory and marvelous in our performance in the best of times. Sometimes, like magic, it all works, preparation and aspiration coalesce, everything thrown up goes in, every swing connects, every pitch is on the black, every run is smooth and fast, every shot is on target, every move is the right one.

Athletes have taken to calling these moments of unexpected perfection being “in the zone.” You enter the “zone,” and inevitably depart, at a time not of your own choosing, but the thrill of being there, even for a short time, is permanent, unforgettable.

Michael Murphy wrote the *Psychic Side of Sports* in 1978, which was later retitled *In the Zone: Transcendent Experience in Sports*. Murphy was a founder of the Esalen Institute on Big Sur in California, which explores the limits of human potential and enjoyed its heyday, as you might imagine, in the expansive 1960s and 70s. Murphy described the “zone” as a “metanormal” experience, akin to religious mysticism.

Works for me.

I think I entered the “zone” just twice as an athlete. The first time was in an actual game I pitched for Middlebury College years ago against RPI. It was as if some supernatural force said “this poor guy, who so often has no idea where the ball is going, should know at least once what it is like to have *control*, to be able to *command* the ball to go where it is intended.”

And that’s what happened. Fastballs were on the corners and at the knees. The curve ball, so fickle, actually curved and darted away from bats. I went all nine innings and we won 4-1, their run of the scratch variety in the eighth.

Even my teammates surpassed themselves, resembling Reese and Robinson more than Alphonse and Gaston. They caught the ball and threw it accurately to bases, and as a team, we comported ourselves like real ballplayers.

It was a wonderful afternoon, ecstasy really, the ultimate expression of so many hours of preparation. There were other pretty good days, and many disasters, but this was special, and remains so in memory.

The other time was an informal night of basketball at the Jewish Community Center in Buffalo NY, on a visit to my friend, Gary, who was in grad school there. No uniforms, no refs, just pick-up hoops. This night, every shot I attempted, each more improbable than the last, went in the basket. "You can't stop me," I said in effect to those defending me, and it was true, this one time.

All those thousands of shots in the driveway, hundreds of hours of official team practices merged into a transcendent present: a journeyman was briefly a star. I never had a game or even a practice session, before or after, like this night in Buffalo. Gary was a witness and will confirm my account, though I suspect he tires of my repetitious nostalgic renderings of that evening.

Exhausted and exhilarated after our play that night, we went to the lair of heroes and imbibed the nectar of the gods (we went to a bar and had a few beers).

Sports psychologists naturally have studied these expressions of "self-surpassing" experience, or "peak performance," to try to find ways to duplicate such extraordinary functioning. Murphy's book includes a number of anecdotes of athletes' "contact with the sublime."

They agree it can't be willed. The "zone" is an "altered state of consciousness" which is temporary, non-voluntary, and unique. What athletes can do is prepare as best they can for an opportunity to visit the "zone" again, by being superbly conditioned, by refining their skills, by being as "balanced" as possible in their approach in their play, and life in general. Relax, concentrate, be ready.

It's not just athletes who wish mightily for a time "in the zone." All who perform or express themselves desire the same thing: to be really "on." Artists and writers often refer to the "muse" (they prefer a more Classical metaphor) and aspire to a state of grace which invites their muse to be present and inspire them in their often solitary exertions.

In writing too, sometimes it all flows. The blank page fails to torment this time and instead fills easily with inspired scratchings. The right words come in the right order, perhaps in a white-heat state of mind, and colorful word pictures can be painted as at no other time.

Inevitably and lamentably, “in the zone” has become something of a cliché. No less a personage than Brittany Spears used the phrase as the title of her 2003 album. ESPN has established night clubs and restaurants in eight cities around the country called “The ESPN *Zone*,” which are described as “all-encompassing sports dining and entertainment mecca(s).”

These profanations notwithstanding, my wish for you this beautiful time of year is for some time in the “zone,” or a visit from your muse, so your recalcitrant genius may blossom in the spring sunlight.