

SEPTEMBER 2013



## Power Converters: What Elite Athletes Know About Resilience

BY DANE JENSEN, PERFORMANCE COACHING COO, AND DR. PETER JENSEN, PERFORMANCE COACHING FOUNDER

Stories of resilience abound in sport: In the past year alone, we've seen Andy Murray convert unfathomable pressure from the British media into a win at Wimbledon, Adrian Peterson return stronger than ever from career-threatening knee surgery to become the NFL MVP, Canada's wheelchair basketball team returning from a tough defeat to the Aussies in Beijing to re-capture gold in London, and the Toronto Maple Leafs come off a heart-breaking playoff loss to win the Stanley Cup.

Okay, that last one didn't happen—yet.

The Leafs notwithstanding, how are these athletes able to withstand the constant pressure inherent in striving to be the best? How are they able to channel the disappointment and frustration of significant setbacks into recovering stronger? How is it that they avoid the dis-engagement, anxiety, and even depression that we now know are all too common (and costly) side effects of demanding corporate work environments?

A large part of the story is leadership: good coaches in sport constantly work on creating ‘Healthy High Performance’ environments where the adversity and pressure inherent in high performance is channeled towards growth and development rather than strain and burn-out.

Ultimately, however, Healthy High Performance is an inside job. The truly elite athletes are what we call Power Converters: they take the energy inherent in pressure and harness it to become stronger. They do this through the skilled use of a personal resilience toolkit that has been explored, codified, and expanded through the discipline of Sport Psychology—a discipline that this author (Peter) has worked in for 30 years across 8 Olympic games.

Healthy High Performance is an inside job. The truly elite athletes are what we call Power Converters: they take the energy inherent in pressure and harness it to become stronger.

---

### ACTIVE AWARENESS: THE POWER CONVERTER FOUNDATION

Take 30 seconds to try a quick experiment: stop right now and write down four things:

1. How much tension is in your shoulders?
2. How fast is your heart beating? Try to count the beats in a ten second window without using your fingers to find a pulse.
3. How happy are you at this exact moment? What other emotions are present?
4. What thoughts are running through your head?

Do you have your answers? Okay, great.

Did anything **surprise** you? Was there tension in your shoulders that you hadn’t consciously noticed? Did you realize that you are still a little annoyed from something that happened earlier today? Is your heart beating faster than you expected? If you’re like most of us, you likely encountered something at least a little surprising. Isn’t that odd? I mean, this stuff is happening inside of you. How can you not be aware of it?

The truth is that the ability to filter out events occurring at the mind, body, and feeling levels is a necessity of survival. If we were constantly being made aware of everything occurring in our bodies—we would be overwhelmed and unable to function. This is especially true when we are under pressure. What is uniquely human, however, is that—even under pressure—we can consciously surface these hidden signals.

The ability to stop and notice what is occurring at the body, feeling, and mind level is a uniquely human trait and is the foundation of becoming a Power Converter.

In fact, the ability to stop and notice what is occurring at the body, feeling, and mind level is a uniquely human trait and is the foundation of becoming a Power Converter. It is only from this position of ‘active awareness’ that we can influence how pressure and stress will impact us.

---

Figure 1: Active Awareness



Different individuals have differing capacities for this type of self-awareness. Here's a proxy: **how hard or easy did you find it to count your heartbeats?** Recent cognitive research has shown that this ability is highly correlated with other forms of self-awareness and can serve as a good way to gauge your overall ability in this area.

## Power converters consciously take a resilient perspective on stressful situations—choosing to view them with a sense of challenge, control, and commitment.

Regardless of your natural affinity for self-awareness, this is a key skill to practice on the journey to becoming a Power Converter. Elite athletes are exceptional at going inside and noticing what emotions they are feeling, what thoughts they are having—and whether they are supporting or under-mining their confidence—and are obviously very attuned to the signals their bodies are sending.

You can start working on this through the simple act of journaling. Set a timer at 90-minute intervals throughout the day. Whenever it goes off, ask yourself the four questions above and record your answers. You'll be amazed at how quickly it becomes second nature to you—and, you'll probably see some interesting patterns start to emerge that were previously hidden.

So what do you do if you notice tension? If you discover that you are holding thoughts that are under-mining your performance or confidence? If negative emotions are dominating?

At this point, you need to choose to change. And in order to make that choice, you need to have a toolkit.

---

### THE RESILIENCE TOOLKIT: MENTAL FITNESS

For years, we have talked about personal resilience as 'mental fitness'.

When an athlete seeks to improve their physical fitness, they focus on some combination of four areas: strength, cardiovascular endurance, power, and flexibility. In the domain of mental fitness, there are also four areas:

1. **PERSPECTIVE** Power converters consciously take a resilient perspective on stressful situations—choosing to view them with a sense of challenge, control, and commitment
2. **ENERGY MANAGEMENT** Power converters manage their energy—not just their time
3. **IMAGERY** Power converters align their imagination with what they want, not what they don't want
4. **FOCUS** Power converters create and hold a clear and compelling vision of the future that imbues their actions with purpose

In each of these four areas, there are skills that you can choose to deploy when you become aware of thoughts, feelings, or physiology that are not supporting Healthy High Performance. We outline some of the skills in each of the four areas in the figure below.

Figure 2: Mental Fitness skills



Each of the skills has a unique role to play in your resilience tool-kit. Some go in at the 'body' level—centering, for example, which is a breathing technique. Others—reframing or self-talk, for example—go in at the 'mind' and 'feeling' level.

In the world of elite sport it is commonly understood that these are not innate abilities—but rather skills that can (and must) be learned, practiced, and mastered if an athlete is to reach the highest levels of performance.

Imagery skills go in at all three levels—mind, body, and feelings. To experience this, close your eyes and picture picking up a lemon from your kitchen counter, slicing it in half, and taking a giant bite. If you're like most of us, you will start to salivate—a bodily response to an imagined event. This unique ability to hit simultaneously at the cognitive, emotional, and physiological levels makes imagery a particularly powerful resilience ally, and a great place to start on your journey to being a Power Converter.

A simple way to practice your imagery: after a couple of weeks of journaling the four questions outlined in the awareness section above, add in a second task. Take 30 seconds, close your eyes, and imagine an upcoming performance. This could be a meeting, a presentation, a performance review conversation, etc. Then, consciously adjust your 'film' to improve one aspect of your performance. Re-run this correct film 2-3 times. You'll be amazed at how frequently these imagined gains translate into real life.

## POWER CONVERTERS: MADE, NOT BORN

In the world of elite sport it is commonly understood that these are not innate abilities—but rather skills that can (and must) be learned, practiced, and mastered if an athlete is to reach the highest levels of performance without sacrificing their physical or mental health. Coaches understand that pressure is a daily reality and that it must be discussable. Sport Psychologists teach athletes the skills that will enable them to grow stronger under immense pressure and work with their coaches to provide opportunities to practice.




The opposite is true in business, where the ability (or inability) to handle pressure is typically viewed as a fixed element of someone's character that will be 'revealed' when the heat is on. This sink or swim mentality is not just dangerous but also at odds with the imperative to nurture and grow the next generation of leaders.

Furthermore, many of us have internalized this fixed view ourselves—accepting artificial boundaries on our potential. Yes, there is a different ceiling for each of us in terms of the level of pressure we can handle—but anyone can improve.

So—change your perspective. Take on the challenge of becoming a Power Converter and move to Healthy High Performance.

*Performance Coaching's Inside Edge programs teach participants the personal resilience tool-kit used by elite athletes to perform under pressure and come back stronger from adversity and set-backs.*

Dane Jensen is the Chief Operating Offering of Performance Coaching, and can be reached at dane.jensen@performancecoaching.ca, Peter Jensen is the Founder of Performance Coaching and can be reached at peter.jensen@performancecoaching.ca. Copyright © 2013 Performance Coaching Inc. All rights reserved.

 <p><b>THE POWER PLANT</b> THE ORGANIZATION</p>	 <p><b>THE SURGE PROTECTOR</b> THE LEADER</p>	 <p><b>THE POWER CONVERTER</b> THE EMPLOYEE</p>	<div style="background-color: #0070C0; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">HEALTHY HIGH PERFORMANCE</div> <p>This is the second article in our series on Healthy High Performance. For an introduction to the topic, including a 'call to action' and overview of the Healthy High Performance model at left, please see the June 2013 article <a href="#">No Pressure, No Diamonds: Reconciling Mental Health With High Performance</a>.</p>
<p>Regulates the overall level of 'current' in the system and provides access to support resources along with the 'permission' to use them</p>	<p>Acts as a firewall from 'surges' rather than an additional source of pressure, and takes conscious action to channel pressure towards igniting growth and development</p>	<p>'Converts' pressure into higher levels of performance through skilled use of a personal resilience toolkit</p>	