

Exploring Roles of Social Facilitation on Peak Performance

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Abstract

The performance of athletes at any level of competition is determined by multifaceted approach. Considering the diverse and complex array of factors that coaches and athletes address to achieve peak athletic performance, conditioning, sport-specific skills training, nutrition, recovery, strength training, and mental/psychological considerations are just some examples of important factors that can significantly affect athletic performance. Social facilitation that stemmed from social psychology initiated by Norman Triplett has been an empirical proven measure to enhancing performance. The co-actor and audience at training and competition have positive and negative factor on athlete performance. This paper in turn review roles of social facilitation on peak performance.

Keywords: *Social facilitation, Peak performance, Co-actor, Audience*

The ultimate goal of most athletes is the attainment of peak performance in their chosen sport. Some athletes will do anything possible to achieve it. In related view, Wells (2008) posits that achieving peak performance is the primary goal of most athletes. Coaches too, are constantly striving to help their athletes reach their potential and achieve peak performance. Interestingly, although the field of sport psychology has focused almost exclusively on peak performance in athletes, it is a common concern and goal for musicians, actors / performers, academics and business people as well.

Peak performance is an all encompassing term used to describe peak experience, flow, the zone, and the exercise high. Experiences of peak performance greatly enhance the quality of life of an athlete (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Considering the diverse and complex array of factors that coaches and athletes address to achieve peak athletic performance, conditioning, sport-specific skills training, nutrition, recovery, strength training, and mental/psychological considerations are just some examples of important factors that can significantly affect athletic performance (Adewunmi, 2009).

One factor that is also germane to athlete excellent performance is social facilitation. Okonkwo (2005) described social facilitation as the effect of limited group of audience and co-actors inclusive. Audience in sport are made up of aggregate groups composed of

spectators, fans, supporters, officials, opponents and other categories of people present during (or that follow) a particular competition. Co-actors on the other hand are coaches, trainers, sports psychologist and other coaching crew who act jointly to ensure athletes excel. These groups of professionals work in close proximity with one another.

According to Ukoetuk (2009) sport permeate social reality from the societal level down to the individual and represent one of the most pervasive social institutions in our society today. The competitive spirit associated with sport added to its inherent element of chance and lack of predictability of the outcome in the competitive situations, constitutes one good aspect of the enduring appeal of sport and makes sport pervasive.

An Overview of Peak Performance

Peak performance according to Privette (2003) refers to full use of any human power. It is a high level of functioning rather than a type of activity. Privette further described peak performance as a once-in-a-lifetime event, or it may occur often or, in rare instances, continuously.

Wells (2008) defined peak performance as a state that is also known as peak experience, the zone of optimal functioning and flow. It refers to a moment when an individual puts it all together, when they are in the zone, when everything flows, and when they achieve an exceptional performance. Wells quoting Jackson & Roberts (1992) also posit peak performance as the prototype of the superior use of human potential.

The experiences of peak performance in the view of Csikszentmihalyi (1991) greatly enhance the quality of life. Center for Performance Psychology (2010) averred that athletes experiencing peak performance feel: utter contentment, high elation, outstanding performance, fun, increased self-confidence, increased motivation, clear goals, low anxiety, enhanced sense of control, and a variety of other feelings that add greatly to the quality of event

Emotional and Performance States Associated With Peak Performance

Peak performance is a term that overlaps within both positive psychology and sport psychology, associated not only with physical aspects of performance, but with mental and emotional performance as well. For athletes already in peak physical condition, gaining an edge may be more about improving what happens within the mind. Athletes are able to differentiate themselves from their competition, based upon the psychological skills they hold, develop, and are able to apply effectively. Athletes must strive for performance excellence and personal excellence as well, with a positive mindset identified as making a vital 1% difference to performance (Pidgeon, 2013). Center for Performance Psychology (2010) postulates the following as feeling and performance associated with peak experience in sport:

1. **Absorption:** Flow experiences occur most often when the individual is totally immersed in the activity. This has been described as being a “cocoon of concentration”. Individuals experiencing peak performance maintain a complete focus on the task at hand.
2. **Detachment:** During peak performance, individuals are not conscious of their performance. Actions are free and spontaneous, rather than forced and continually monitored. Participants are often detached from their environment and report complete silence around them, with the exception of important cues from officials, teammates and coaches. Negative self-critique is virtually non-existent. Team sport athletes feel in control without having to be involved in every ball, play, or shot. Individual sport athletes maintain a sense of control without the need to “force it.”
3. **Ecstasy:** A feeling of euphoria is often associated with peak performance. This feeling is associated with high levels of internal, or intrinsic, motivation, and is a major reason some athletes continue to participate.
4. **Power:** Individuals perceive themselves as having an abnormal amount of power during moments of peak performance. This is usually described as a sense of “being able to do no wrong.” Athletes experiencing peak performance have complete confidence that they are able to execute in any situation, without losing their sense of strategy for the game. That is, just because a basketball player feels confident in making a half-court shot doesn’t mean he/she won’t pass the ball farther up the floor to look for a smarter shot.
5. **Altered perceptions of time:** During these moments of intense concentration, participants reveal experiences of time speeding up, or slowing down. Altered spatial perceptions have also been revealed—things may seem closer or larger than they actually are.
6. **Sense of unity:** Flow states are characterized by a feeling of oneness with the performance environment. Also, they involve the meshing of the physical and mental. This harmonizing produces a very special feeling of an integrated whole.

Social Facilitation and Peak Performance

Jason (2011) described social facilitation as changes in performance that occur when individuals perform in the presence of others versus when they are alone. In a similar vein, Strauss (2002) and Jarvis (1999) opine that the term social facilitation describes the ways in which athletes’ performance can be affected by the presence of others. Social facilitation has occasionally been attributed to the fact that certain people are more susceptible to social influence, with the argument that person factors can make these people more aware of evaluation. These personality characteristics may cause some people to be more greatly affected by the presence of their observers.

Social facilitation received its name because it originally referred to the boost in performance (“facilitation”) individuals received when they performed in the presence of others (“social”). Jarvis (1999) asserts that there are several other ways in which the presence of other people can affect athletes’ behaviour and performance. Under some

circumstances the presence of other people, such as competitors, enhances their performance. However, under other circumstances athletes' effort and ability to make decisions can be adversely affected by others, leading to poor performance.

According to Uziel (2007) the role of social facilitation is important to consider in social situations, because it implies that people's performance does not rely solely on their abilities, but is also impacted by the internal awareness of being evaluated. Performance can be greatly affected by situation factors, thus making it possible to entirely alter the outcome of a situation. This can be very important when considering how anyone will perform under evaluation and how to potentially prepare for those situations. For example, if a professional basketball player practices shooting free throws with fake audience noise in the background, he will not feel as if he is under as much evaluation in a real game situation. This is because the noise-pressured free throws will start to become a simple task rather than a complex task as he practices more. Although he will know that the fake noise is not evaluating him the same way that real crowd would, he is adjusting his awareness of the potential evaluation, and is thus trying to combat any harm that social facilitation could bring to his shooting abilities. Jarvis (1999) explores social facilitation from two perspectives: co-action and audience effects

Co-action and Audience Effects

Co-action effects occur when other people are carrying out the same task alongside you, as takes place in a race, or when training with friends or team-mates. Jarvis (1999) reported that one of the earliest studies in sport psychology was done by Triplett in 1898. He found that children asked to wind fishing reels did so faster when in the presence of other children also winding fishing reels. Triplett also found that cyclists who trained with another cyclist practiced at faster speeds than those training alone.

Audience effects occur when we are being watched. A study of audience effects was carried out by Michaels, Blommel, Brocato, Linkous and Rowe (1982). Researchers observed pool players in a college student union and selected above average and below average players. First, those selected were watched and the percentage of successful shots was recorded. Four researchers then walked up to the tables of the selected players and watched the rest of their game. It was found that the audience had the opposite effect on the below-average and above-average players. The players identified as below average in ability played worse in the presence of an audience, while those identified as above average played better when watched.

Theoretical Approaches of Social Facilitation to Performance

Social facilitation evolved through different theories. The foremost will be cursorily examined.

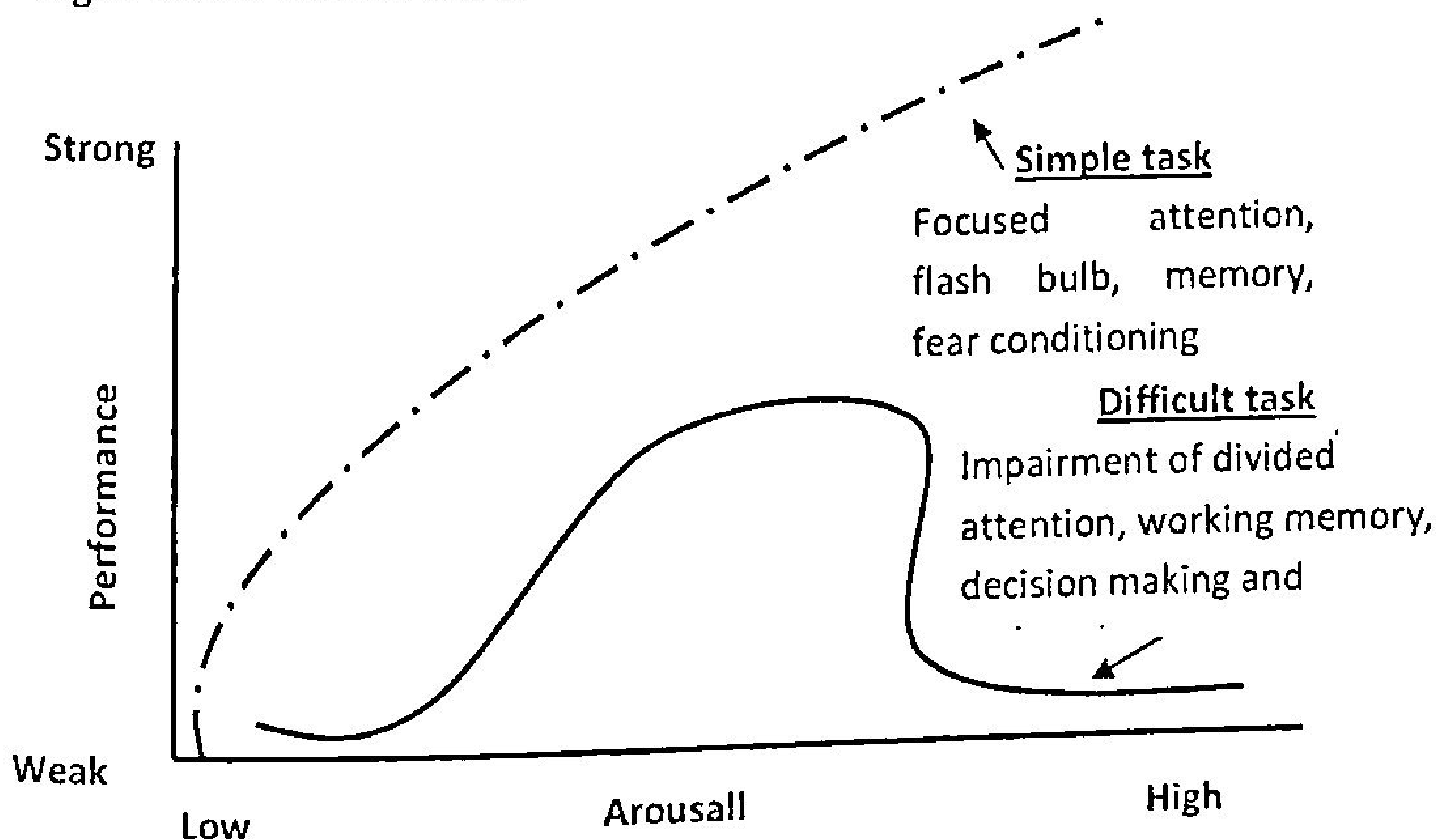
Drive Theory

This also referred to as activation theory. In 1965, Robert Zajonc proposed the first activation theory for social facilitation. Zajonc's generalized drive hypothesis was the first theory that addressed why the presence of others increased performance sometimes yet decreased it at other times. Zajonc argued that the presence of others serves as a source of arousal, and heightened arousal increases the likelihood of an organism to do well-learned or habitual responses. For this reason, arousal improves performance on simple (well-learned) tasks, but impairs performance on complex (not well-learned) tasks. Zajonc's reasoning was based on Yerkes-Dodson's law, which holds that performance works like an inverse "U" function. This means that an individual's optimal drive is higher for simpler, or well-practiced tasks, and that the same individual's optimal drive is lower for more complex, or less-practiced tasks. The presence of other people further arouses us and increases our drive level, and so an individual's performance will be enhanced if a task is simple (because of the high levels of energy) but diminished if the task is complex. Zajonc tested his theories by having people complete word association tasks alone and again in the presence of others.

Yerkes-Dodson's Arousal Approach

This theory suggests that the mere or imagined presence of people in social situations creates an atmosphere of evaluation. The Yerkes-Dodson law of social facilitation states that, in this atmosphere, "the mere presence of other people will enhance the performance in speed and accuracy of well-practiced tasks, but will degrade the performance of less familiar tasks." For example, a star soccer player may perform better in his game when more people are watching him perform. However, if a person is asked to fix a car's engine during a road race but is not a mechanic, he will not perform as well if he is aware of the presence of others than he would in a situation when he feels less evaluated or pressured, like just trying to fix a car in his garage.

Fig 1: Yerkes-Dodson law of social facilitation on simple and difficult task



Source: Strauss (2002)

How to Facilitate Peak Performance

Center for Performance Psychology (2010) postulates the following approaches to facilitate peak performance:

- i. Maximize physical practice—If you're not giving 100 percent in practice, you can't expect it in competition.
- ii. Have a clear idea of what you want to accomplish before the practice or competition begins—Set SMARTS goals.
- iii. Address outside distractions and worries before practice or competition—This way, you're able to devote all your attention to your game.
- iv. Develop and use a pre-performance routine to make sure you're mentally and physically prepared
- v. Create short verbal or physical cues to help you get back on track after distractions. This **MUST** be practiced before they can be implemented in competition. Examples include "next play," "recover," or a tap on the thigh to refocus attention.
- vi. Build self-confidence by recalling what you do well **AT LEAST** as often as what you should work on.
- vii. Choose to be optimistic, nonjudgmental and frame your self-talk in the positive. An example is to say "I have to stay balanced and on top" instead of "I can't throw a strike."
- viii. Use imagery to rehearse what playing great feels like. Remember to use all the senses, not just sight. There's a specific sound that's made when a club strikes a golf ball just right...that's what you want to hear during imagery. Likewise, there are smells—like the way your hand smells after handling a basketball—and tastes—like the dirt that gets into your mouth after a great slide into second—that make the imagery as realistic as possible. The better your imagery, the more your brain and body have to work with during competition.

Conclusion

The inner craving of most athletes is attainment of excellence in their chosen sport. To achieve this, different techniques that ranges from technical, psychological, sociological and many others are required in right proportion. Social facilitation that stemmed from social psychology initiated by Norman Tripplett has been an empirical proven measure to enhancing performance. The co-actor and audience at training and competition have positive and negative factor on athlete performance. In view of this, athletes rise and sustainability at the top should be a multifaceted role.

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