

Achieving Championship Writing Mentality—Part I

By Colleen Patrick patrick@screenwalk.org

Attaining a championship mentality means developing a positive attitude, unwavering persistence and perpetual stamina. A championship mentality enables you to believe in yourself; to learn your craft in the most effective and enjoyable way; to magnetize marvelous mentors and find supportive people to encourage and train you as you methodically become increasingly successful.

More importantly, a championship mentality teaches you how to appreciate where you are right now, realistically, so you can establish your personal timetable for progress and, in turn, learn to never, *never* give up on yourself.

PSYCHOLOGY OF SUCCESS

A dynamic field of study that specializes in creating a winning mindset is sports psychology. Applying its canons, which have been developed from decades of research, can help you thrive in any personal endeavor, whether it's writing, acting, art, athletics, producing, directing, parenting or being an entrepreneur. Much of this column is based on the principles of sports psychology.

THE ZONE

Where You Want To Be

The goal is to be able to put yourself in The Zone every time you need or wish to be—and get there as quickly as possible.

The Zone is a special mind/body place that feels like every priceless word effortlessly pours out of your mind like 24-karat molten gold. Every character easily becomes transparently clear. Every scene pops out of the page, leaping to colorful, vibrant life.

The difference between amateurs and professionals is that amateurs know what The Zone feels like, but they don't know precisely how they got there. So they can't consistently recreate that excellent performance. Talented amateurs hit The Zone now and then, and hit the wall other times without the discipline required to gracefully ease into The Zone when they wish.

Professionals have a personal, developed system for approaching a task that enables them to

recreate The Zone over and over, with victorious results. Consistency and reliability are the most estimable attributes of the professional.

Because The Zone is such a personal phenomenon, the development of each writer's systematic approach to successfully reach The Zone time after time is built in a uniquely individual way.

Sliding Into The Zone

Winning athletes experience the sensation of The Zone like this: it combines a sense of ultra-well being with an intense focus on the task accompanied by peak physical actions and reactions.

All professional athletes, women and men, spend their careers adjusting their physicality, minds and emotions on nearly a daily basis. The human body begins to "break down" at a relatively early age, so athletes learn to play wiser in order to retain their performance efficiency. Nutrition and exercises are tailored to their event and individual peculiarities, as well as their special needs. Coaches help them discover what works best.

The mind—the intellect—is fed constantly: changes in the sport, new strategies, nutrition, affirmations, visualizations and an increasing ability to focus, closing out the rest of the world all help modify your mindset.

Emotions are kneaded and massaged in ways that allow the athlete to redirect negative feelings into a positive psyche—at will.

For many, the additional element of spirituality is present—these performers feel as if they are literally channeling triumphant achievements through their bodies from a power greater than they are.

This outgrowth of integrating the body, mind, spirit and emotions in whatever way most appropriate for you creates your personal preparation blue print—a dependable ritual designed to help you virtually slide into The Zone before you approach your work. Or, for that matter, whatever you do that will be enhanced by this state of being.

You sense you are in the right place at the right time doing the right thing with the right people for all the right reasons.

When every part of you flows in the right

direction and works together, you not only create that sense of well being, but successful performances as well.

Zone Sensations

If you recall your own experiences, these are the characteristics you share with everyone who is in The Zone:

**Relaxed Comfortable Powerful Peaceful
Energized Alert Focused Certain
Enjoyment In Control Total Focus
Work Feels Easy A Sense of Knowing
Grounded Spiritual**

You will focus on what you want, not what you don't want.

When you are in The Zone, it's important to float in it, breathe through it and enjoy it. Smile in appreciation and say, "Yes!" or use a mantra that keeps you in The Zone, such as, "I am free. I am flowing." You can also visualize the successful completion of the next immediate task at hand.

The moment you bring invasive attention to it, as if you are suspended in an *out of body experience* looking at yourself and thinking, "Dude! Check it out! Look at me! I am in The Zone!" you'll usually break the spell and fall out of it.



▶ Writer-director-producer Colleen Patrick's screenplay *The Director* was a quarterfinalist in this year's CineStory competition; last year her screenplay *The Lucky Penny* finished in the top 10% of Austin's Heart of the Film competition, and she was a finalist in the Disney scriptwriting competition with a "Frasier" script, *The Hero*.

Colleen's feature script *Into Thin Air* was optioned by Landis Productions (US) in 1998. Colleen is a former president and international liaison for the Seattle chapter of Women In Film.

Colleen's short film, which she wrote, directed and produced, *Life As Art* was an official 1997 Academy Award submission. She has written, produced and directed four short films, the most recent a pilot for the series, *Behind The Movie Screen*, a mockumentary associated with her feature, *The Director*. The pilot can be seen at <www.director3.com>.

She is currently in development as writer/director with her feature, *The Director*. Colleen is a successful on-camera acting coach who also successfully coaches writers. One of her writers was recently picked up by a major New York agent; 12 publishers are interested in the writer's book. Colleen will be writing the screenplay based on the book.

She is the author of two published books, *Mind Over Media*, (CHEF Publishing) and *The 100% Solution* (Meadow Brook Publications).

ZONE SABOTEURS

Perceptions

The sensation most likely to prevent you from coasting into your own Zone is experiencing a given challenge as *threatening* instead of *inspiring*.

If something throws you into a state of fear instead of increased proficiency, you'll feel like something is missing; that you're going to lose. Some people feel small in this state, as if they are a helpless child again.

It's extremely difficult to redirect negative, sabotaging self-talk into positive, supportive thoughts when you're shut down and shut off from what you actually know by terror. This feels as if whatever you know is somehow locked away instead of immediately at your command.

Flexibility is imperative. The ability to adjust to changes immediately, as they occur.

It's almost impossible to adjust to new situations at the moment when you're smothered in fright or dread. Competition requires effective responses at that instant, nearly instinctually. If you're in The Zone, you can turn any unwelcome, intruding negative thoughts and emotions into a positive and supportive mindset instantly. If you haven't trained yourself to do this, it can spell FADE OUT before FADE IN is typed.

Competition, by the way, is not only defined as contests between you and other people. Most artists are often their own most difficult adversaries. We are our own worst critics, and too often tend to do things that get in our own way of achievement—subconsciously or consciously.

Right/Wrong

Two major influences also prevent The Zone from being part of your life:

The first is making the work right or wrong, where:

Right = good; wrong = bad
Good = praise, wrong = punishment.

I advise people I coach to evaluate what they do with only two categories:

Works.
Doesn't Work.

It either works or it doesn't. If it works, hurrah! If it doesn't work, it needs adjusting. It is not a reflection of anyone's intelligence, talent, capabilities or skill. It's a reflection of the development of a script or book or performance.

Of course, the trick is to educate ourselves enough to know the process and technicalities

of story telling and screenwriting so we can understand why the word, dialogue, action, parenthetical or scene works or doesn't work. We must know what rules we want to break and how to break them if our story is served by taking some liberties.

Perfection: Mission Impossible

Organic creations and performances need to be seen as being in constant development; they can never achieve *absolute* perfection because they are, by definition, produced by humans and therefore dynamic—constantly changing.

Grab an orange and examine it—you're looking at a perfectly formed fruit, no matter its size or precise shape, right? No two are alike. Now peel and eat it. Each orange varies in size, shape, and texture and taste. Still, each is considered perfect.

Despite this apparent perfection, orange farmers are constantly adjusting growing elements in their groves to create a better, more "perfect" orange—and this in the face of uncertain weather conditions that could kill an entire crop—or make them the best oranges they've ever grown.

Even as a painting or no-hit baseball game are considered finished, the artist and the pitcher realize things they can adjust or improve in their next venture. That's healthy. Not expecting perfection, but improvement. Development.

I work with actors and writers who constantly want to quickly consider their work "done," instead of realizing they are in the midst of a building process—brick by brick. Anything built in this thoughtful, conscientious way always improves so much it raises the artist to a level they never realized they could attain.

One of my actors tells me she has grown to love the monologues she has painstakingly developed word by word (she's now cast in almost every audition). She says when she just wanted to memorize monologues, topping them off with a little character development, she tired of them. And she was missing the most important reward of meticulous development: confidence.

She has also learned how not to chastise herself for not being "perfect" immediately after diving into a role.

Every moment we spend punishing ourselves for being "wrong" or beating ourselves silly believing we've "screwed up" is time we take away from our ability to adjust—to alter and re-create. We must feel safely vulnerable to fully understand why something does not work so it can be altered.

When you torment yourself, your receptors shut down. Nothing can come in because you're spewing venom, flooding your mind and body with psychological poison.

Feeling threatened instead of empowered when we're challenged will sabotage our attempts to get or stay in The Zone.

This doesn't mean that because someone dislikes your script that she or he is automatically correct, or that you should go along with a "suggestion" to make your older, black, female antagonist a young white male. It means that maintaining your integrity does not have to translate into defensive behavior. No need to be defensive when you're in The Zone!

The second major Zone-blocker occurs when a person has not developed a systematic, habitual, ritualistic approach to the work. Some people believe that this sensation makes them more spontaneous and that they are taking "risks."

Well, good for them. They don't need this column.

Let them "wing it."

I have found that those who have created their own system of preparation and developing material tend to succeed and enjoy their work. Perhaps it is the love of the work that inspires them to immerse themselves deeply enough to devise a working ritual for preparation, and a system for creating the work.

Jodie Foster, for example, has **never** taken an acting class and is not interested in doing theater; she is mostly self-taught or coached. The depth of preparation she invests in her film characters is apparent. Her performances are so technically sensational and emotionally engaging that no one can deny she is amongst the best film actresses in the world.

And she can be consistently brilliant in any situation. Foster and Anthony Hopkins in *Silence Of The Lambs* both performed their solo shots alone, only in the company of the director and crew. They were not looking at each other or another person. They were simply given an eye line (a direction to look) and *acted*. Imagination is the most fabulous tool for any artist.

These artists don't leave their performances to chance. They've perfected their preparation process to the degree they are free to *act* on set. Then leave their work there—much to the joy of friends and families.

KNOWLEDGE + CONFIDENCE = SUCCESS

Knowledgeable artists who understand what they want to show or say and how to use good technique effectively are free to work courageously, without constriction. They can recognize when something doesn't work, and they can adjust it.

NEXT ISSUE: Championship Mentality—How To Achieve It. ■