

Control over the body – the usefulness of the Feldenkrais Method in sports

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The Feldenkrais Method is not very well known in the world of sports. But as a matter of fact many athletes would benefit a great deal from it in one way or another. The following is a discussion about how the Feldenkrais Method can help you who are into sports.

Control over the body. This is probably the most important thing for any athlete. Regardless if we practise a strength-event like weightlifting or a precision-event like shooting, perform advanced acrobatics like the gymnasts or do something as “simple” as running. It doesn’t matter if we use equipment, need to control a vehicle, physically defeat an opponent as in wrestling or master difficult conditions like a ski slope. Every event demands that the athlete master some kind of technique and a condition for this is that we have control over our body.

From wrong to right

Too often you see coaches who *tell* the athlete what he or she is doing *wrong*. From there it’s a long way to *teach* someone to do *right*. This is, as I see it, the big and difficult challenge for a coach. How do you help an athlete to break a habitual but incorrect pattern of movement and replace it with another, similar, that the athlete never has performed before?

A concrete example from my own sport:

A common instruction in athletics (at least in Sweden) is “You’ve got to push with the hip”. It’s implied that everybody understands what this means. But there is no guarantee for that. Actually, it’s not certain that even the coach knows what he or she means. What exactly is “the hip”? Is it the same as the pelvis? What part of the hip should you push with? Is it forward you need push? Should you push all the time?

If you analyse the way the pelvis moves when you run you will quickly find that the instruction “push with hip” is muddy at best. Still the phrase is repeated in different variations every day in sports fields all over Sweden.

The problem here is that the coach is trying to explain a complicated series of movements with the help of a diffuse and to a large degree incorrect instruction in the hope that the athlete will have an intuitive understanding of what is implied.

One problem with practising technique is that in almost every sport you need to be close to the limit of your ability. Movements are to be performed in high speed, often with great effort of strength and not seldom under considerable fatigue. In order to master this in competition you need to practise under similar circumstances. But everybody knows that the faster you do something, the more force you use and the more tired you get the more difficult it gets to sense what you’re actually doing.

Another problem is that for most of us large parts of the body are “blind” areas. That is we have problems sensing them. This greatly reduces the ability to take technique instructions. If you can’t feel what you are doing it’s difficult to change it.

Feldenkrais for athletes

So what can you do? Something well worth trying is the Feldenkrais Method. Really! You who are familiar with the Feldenkrais Method know that it often is about doing small, slow movements lying on the floor. What has that to do with running, weight-lifting, alpine skiing,

golf and so forth? From a distance: not much. But if you look a little closer you will see that athletes may benefit a great deal from the Feldenkrais Method. Here are six arguments to back up that statement:

- 1) Almost everybody who tries the Feldenkrais Method feels that the muscles of the body after a lesson are more relaxed. This pleasant “side-effect” alone is beneficial for the athlete. Tense muscles work worse in all kinds of ways. Among other things the flexibility is reduced and the risk of injury is higher.
- 2) One of the most important principles of the Feldenkrais Method is that the skeleton is supposed to support the body while the muscles are to be used in motions. With an incorrect body posture the muscles need to help in the task that the skeleton is supposed to perform and this steals muscle power from the movements you want to do. Let’s take a step in running as an example. If the foot hits the ground in the wrong spot in relation to the body this causes an imbalance that must be corrected with the help of the muscles. In the case of an optimal placement of the foot the skeleton takes the “punch” and the muscles can be used to take the next step. In this way both time and power are saved. Furthermore the risk of injury due to improper strains is minimized.
- 3) As we discussed earlier most of us have areas of the body that we really don’t feel all that much. We don’t know what is happening there, don’t notice if we are tense and so forth. By working with small, slow movements, as you do in the Feldenkrais Method, we can start to “chart” these unexplored areas. The ability to sense what is going on in the body and by will control the different parts of the body is useful when we do sports.
- 4) One who has knowledge both of the Feldenkrais Method and a sports event will discover that a movement in a lesson may have a strong connection with a movement in the particular event. An area of the body that is especially important in running (and, since it’s the centre of the body, so too in almost every other sport) is the hip area. It’s here that the largest muscles of the body are located, but unfortunately it can be difficult to feel what we do with them. This is apparent in the “push with the hip” example from earlier. The possibility to learn a new way to move the pelvis is, I think, considerably greater if you’re lying down than if you’re running the fastest that you can. If you’re working consciously it doesn’t have to be that hard to take this knowledge from the floor to the track.
- 5) You who try the Feldenkrais Method will notice that the teacher will keep asking questions (often hard to answer) and seldom, if ever, will tell you how you are supposed to feel. The basis is that there are no “rights” or “wrongs”, but that you are allowed to feel for yourself and by doing so learn more about how your own body functions. Naturally concepts of “right” and “wrong” are both useful and necessary in sports. But I think that this exploring attitude would do well in sports training as well.
- 6) The creator of the Feldenkrais Method, Moshe Feldenkrais, has said that he wasn’t after flexible bodies but flexible minds. Furthermore it was his opinion that our thoughts, feelings, sensations and movements are influencing each other. You can break negative patterns of thoughts, but often it’s quite hard and can take a long time. The same goes for our feelings. Often we don’t even know what it is we are feeling.

And not all of us are used to reflect upon what we think and feel. But we all have an experience of movement. That's why Dr Feldenkrais chose to work with movements. Through an increased physical self-consciousness and through the allowing and forgiving attitude that is ever-present in the Feldenkrais Method we can also be more conscious of our thoughts and feelings and hopefully feel better about ourselves. Any sports psychologist would probably agree that this might improve your performances.