

G E R R Y L O P E Z

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ALL IT TAKES IS ONE WAVE, NOT EVEN THAT.
ONE TURN. JUST A MOMENT THAT KEEPS
PULLING YOU BACK TO HAVE ANOTHER
MOMENT. AND IT NEVER ENDS.

Feel

FEEL

*H*ow do you want to feel?

It seems like such a simple question. It seemed too simple to me as I interviewed hundreds of world class performers about their lives and careers expecting to hear about hard work and perseverance and goal setting. Those words were rarely spoken.

And yet they used that word over and over again. Feel.

I became interested in feel when I was working on my dissertation for my PhD in Sports Psychology. I was lucky enough to work with several world class performers — a swimmer, a drummer, a heart surgeon, a veterinarian, a woman college basketball player, Jim. They became friends of mine, good friends.

These connections were the key I never found in school, in the people who I was supposed to learn from, to listen to. These people were well educated with long lists of achievements, although in their own way, in their own time, they started asking me about themselves. They were curious about my work, about how athletes thought and trained, how they prepared. The conversation began.



We were all trained to think, to analyze, to dig deeper, to learn techniques in our own fields. Yet the conversation kept coming back to the experiences we had as children and as teenagers — that play required the same kind of discipline that our careers required. When we played with that discipline, we came alive, we felt *free*.

My dissertation focused on this feeling. When I thought and analyzed and had to come up with a thesis topic, I chose to focus on freedom. There was something about *freedom* that made world class performers better than other people. They had the freedom to act, think, train, learn in ways other people did not.

I was pretty full of myself. I was studying freedom, something important, philosophically challenging, testing myself. I set off to free the world. I asked everyone I knew, anyone who would listen, who would talk to me. “What is freedom?” and, “How do you define freedom?”

A month into the process, I already wanted to quit because almost without exception, people answered by describing a lack of boundaries or a lack of oppression rather than the qualities for freedom itself. I was missing something. I blamed the people I was asking for not being curious enough, for not thinking about freedom. It was boring and I was boring myself.

Then one day, an ultimate Frisbee player changed my perspective. He told he had no idea how to describe freedom. Then he went on to say, “I feel the most free when I am flying through the air diving after the Frisbee in the end zone.”

That is how I discovered *feel*.

He was not thinking about flying through the air. He felt it. Right there in front of me. I saw it. *I felt it*. I felt it enough to want to go play Frisbee, to see what it was like. And now I understood what all those others had

been trying to tell me, what I was to hear over and over again in my work. I heard what turned my work into play.

In interviewing hundreds of world class performers from a wide range of fields, I continued to hear the same thing over and over again. I felt the same thing over and over again.

When I asked people to explain how they came to be world-class, “How did you get where you are?” every one of them struggled with an intellectual explanation... but for a few moments in every conversation, they came alive. They lit up, sat forward, and *felt* what they did. They transcended their resumes, ignored their achievements. They told me their *stories*, stories defined not by what they did, but how it felt.

Let me now ask you the question: How do you want to feel?

Did you stop and ask “What is feel?” Probably not. Most people don’t. In fact, it may seem like a silly question. They dismiss it as trivial, even irresponsible.

Almost no one ever asks me what I mean by *feel*.

“Does how you feel affect how you perform?”

Jim and I have asked hundreds of audiences and thousands of people this question. They nod and answer without hesitation a resoundingly “Yes!”

We then ask another question.

“When was the last time someone asked you at work (or anywhere else for that matter) how they could help you feel the way you want to or need to?”

Audiences break into laughter. When we ask why they are laughing, they say “No one.”

Yet, they have all just agreed that how they feel affects how they perform. This means no one responsible for performances has offered to help them perform better or has even asked them if they could help them put feel to work.

I sat one day in a small meeting with the Vice President of a large organization. Ironically, she was the Vice President for Leadership Development. We went through this Q and A about feel. Did it affect performance? Yes. What did she do then for her employees, for the leaders she was in charge of developing as far as this feel that affected their performance?

She said “Nothing. It is not my responsibility.”

Huh?

“You just said that how we feel affects how we perform?” I replied.

“Yes, but it’s not my responsibility to my employees to worry about how they feel.”

If you agree that how we feel affects how we perform, I would argue that to ignore *feel* is irresponsible. This is the dilemma Jim faced when he heard me ask the question. This is the opposite of what we are told growing up.

Yet, this is exactly what I heard in my interviews from some of the most successful people in the world.

The world-class performers I interviewed, the friends who started me down this path, even those I work with who seem to have lost their way all said the same thing I experienced talking to the Frisbee guy.

At some point in their lives, they *felt something* when they did whatever it is they chose as a career. They wanted to do it again and again and again. The more they did it, the better they got at it because they did it longer

than people who worked at it. The better they got, the more they felt how they wanted to feel.

How do you want to feel?