Invited Commentary

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Mental control is a key to competing successfully. As Janelle (1999) points out, knowing this is one thing, while achieving control is quite another. Sometimes athletes have negative thoughts and self-doubts and cannot seem to overcome them. To explain failures of cognitive functioning and reversals in attempts at self-regulation by athletes, Janelle uses the theory of ironic processes of mental control (Wegner, 1989, 1997). After outlining the theory, which he does in a very clear and concise manner, he discusses how ironic processes may be operating in various sport and exercise situations, such as loss of self-confidence, the development of negative expectations and negative images, the inability to regulate arousal and anxiety levels, movement control problems resulting from negative self-talk, problems controlling attentional focus and perceptions of pain, and even mood states and exercise adherence. Although each of these can be accounted for as the result of ironic effects on mental control processes, what is the advantage in doing so? Other theories (e.g., self-efficacy theory, Bandura, 1997; catastrophe theory, Hardy, 1990; theory of planned behavior, Ajzen, 1985) can equally or better explain some of these losses of mental control. Some of these theories have been subjected to considerable investigation in the sport and exercise domains. We are unclear how researchers and practitioners may benefit from using the theory of ironic processes of mental control compared to these other theories.

We have additional reservations concerning Wegner’s (1989, 1997) theory. Surely ironic processes can not solely account for what PGA players call the “yips” or why people don’t adhere to exercise programs. Moreover, this theory is very difficult to examine empirically. Ironic processes occur relatively infrequently, especially in elite athletes, and their occurrence is virtually impossible to predict. Just because a sport situation has a high mental load (e.g., the need to concentrate

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on specific plans or performance strategies, the imposition of strict time constraints), an athlete might not (and rarely does) lose mental control. Janelle offers little direction in how researchers should test the theory of ironic processes of mental control. While ironic processes are certainly of interest to sport psychologists, we remain unconvinced about the generality of the theory and its potential value for researchers.

Putting the theory aside, the idea that attempting to suppress negative thoughts and self-doubts can sometimes produce the opposite result is intriguing. Janelle suggests various approaches for interrupting ironic processes. The first is reducing cognitive load (i.e., anxiety and task complexity). While this seems reasonable, there are some practical considerations. Anxiety can be both debilitating and facilitative (Jones, 1995), and only when it is likely to hurt performance should it be reduced. Reducing task complexity in many sports entails making strategies of play simpler. Unfortunately, simplifying strategies can also make them less effective. Given that ironic processes occur infrequently, is it prudent to reduce task complexity because there is a small probability of ironic processes. Moreover, assessing anxiety and task complexity is difficult, often impossible. Therefore, determining whether cognitive load is high enough for ironic processes to occur and be a cause for concern almost becomes a guessing game.

Janelle's second suggestion is the use of paradoxical interventions—focusing on the negative thoughts so that the monitoring process will eventually find incompatibilities with these ideas, resulting in a focus on positive thinking. This approach, as Janelle admits, would seem quite risky at this point. It is the opposite of what coaches and sport psychologists have been teaching athletes to do for many years. Would an elite athlete be willing to try a paradoxical intervention, especially when no empirical support can be offered? In fact, Carter and Kelly (1997) found that a paradoxical imagery intervention increased somatic anxiety and reduced self-confidence in some nonelite athletes. In addition, we have no idea how long a paradoxical intervention must be practiced to be effective. Negative thought stopping and the use of positive imagery are easily learned and can be applied quickly. Spending the time and effort to learn a paradoxical intervention (i.e., getting good at thinking about something negative) is probably not the most effective use of an elite athlete's resources.

Janelle's other two suggestions for interrupting ironic processes, automaticity and awareness, are simply comments on the nature of expertise (as clearly indicated by the subheading used). As such, we are not sure why he includes them in his list of recommendations. It is not very insightful to tell athletes that the better they get the less self-doubts they will have and that it is sometimes hard to get rid of negative thoughts.

While we are fairly critical of how Janelle applies the theory of ironic processes of mental control in sport and exercise, we found his article very thought provoking. Negative thoughts are experienced by every athlete, no matter how skilled. The golf example that Janelle provides is an excellent one. Virtually every golfer has thought "whatever you do, don't hit the ball in the water" and then done just that. Considering the various situations in which ironic processes usually appear, we realized that the negative thought processes are mostly verbal. Janelle discusses imagery at some length and contends that negative images often impede the generation of positive, confidence-building ones. Our research on athletes' use