Isn’t It Ironic?
Or Irony Is in the Unconscious Eye
of the Beholder

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In beginning this commentary on Janelle’s (1999) “Ironic Processes in Sport: Implications for Sport Psychologists,” I must confess that I was unfamiliar with Wegner’s theory prior to reading Janelle’s article. Consequently, my understanding and consideration of Wegner’s theory is based solely on Janelle’s explanation and application to sport. With that said, I came away from the article with a respect for the value of Wegner’s theory, an appreciation for Janelle’s efforts in applying it to sport, and a feeling that for the theory to be most useful to applied sport psychologists, other issues should be considered.

Wegner’s basic premise is that people possess two levels of cognitive processing that can be employed to establish or maintain thought control. The first level is the conscious operating process which acts to ensure that our thoughts are consistent with our desired goals. For example, if a tennis player’s goal is to hit her serve wide to her opponent’s backhand, the operating process will direct focus appropriately to ensure that she does what she needs to do physically and technically to hit an effective serve.

The second level is the unconscious monitoring process, which identifies any potential threats to the operating process so that it can deal with it and performance is not negatively affected. Returning to the example above, the monitoring process might notice some negative thoughts in the operating process (e.g., “I’m going to double fault”) beginning to emerge in the player before she serves. This impending threat to performance is recognized by the monitoring process, and the player takes active steps to refocus attention onto facilitative cues, such as her toss or the desired location of the serve.

The ironic aspect of this system arises when mental load increases due to, for example, perceived pressure, anxiety, or distractions. When people become overloaded cognitively, what had been simple awareness and notification of a potential threat by the monitoring process to performance becomes a preoccupation with that threat. Thus, attempts to alleviate the threatening information result in a fixation with the thoughts that are contradictory to the person’s conscious goal state. Once again referring to the previous example, if the player is trying to hit the...
serve at match point against her, the pressure and anxiety experienced prior to the
serve may overload her, resulting in her preoccupation on the very thoughts that
will likely lead to a double fault.

I can not reasonably argue with Wegner's findings that ironic processes oc-
cur in the process of mental control. Janelle's description of empirical evidence
supporting Wegner's seems incontrovertible. However, based on my experiences
as an applied sport psychologist, I believe that several issues could strengthen our
understanding of ironic processing theory and its utility to our field.

Theoretical Commentary

The fact that ironic processes occur is not an issue in this commentary. What is of
concern is understanding under what conditions they emerge. Janelle indicates
that ironic processes do not occur very often, particularly among successful ath-
letes. But he does not delineate the mediating factors for which ironic processes
will or will not result. Applied sport psychologists must recognize the factors that
distinguish the relative presence or absence of ironic effects in successful versus
less successful athletes so that they can help athletes minimize its emergence.

Emotional vs. Informational Processing

One factor that might mediate whether the potential threat that arises in the operat-
ing process and activates the monitoring process produces ironic effects is how the
negative information is processed. Information can be processed either emotion-
ally or informationally. Janelle's own discussion of pain perception and control
helps illustrate this distinction. Research indicates that pain interpreted as infor-
mation is perceived as less discomforting than emotional pain. When it is pro-
cessed as information, pain is interpreted more positively, enhances perceived con-
trol, and does not trigger the strong emotional reactions that are often produced. In
contrast, pain that is viewed emotionally, usually in terms of a threat to well-being,
is seen negatively, causes a loss of control, and activates stronger emotions that
lead to a vicious cycle of pain and negative emotions.

This same view can apply to potentially threatening information that emerges
during the operating process, the difference being that with pain, the threat is one
of bodily harm, whereas with mistakes, losses, or failure, the threat is psycho-
emotional harm. Janelle's example of the basketball player who shoots an airball
illustrates this difference. He indicates that it is necessary to focus on the negative
performance in order to correct it and, by doing so, the player may become obsessed
with shooting another airball on his next shot. I would suggest that how the player
interprets the airball will determine whether ironic processes occur.

If the player interprets the airball informationally, she can determine why
she missed the shot and take the appropriate corrective action on her next attempt.
This approach would not activate the monitoring process because the interpreta-
tion is not inconsistent with her conscious goal state of making her next shot. As a
result, ironic processes would not occur. However, if the player interprets the airball
emotionally, the missed shot will be viewed as a threat to her intended goal state,
the monitoring process will be activated, and, if cognitive overload is present,
ironic processes will emerge.