

## Unlocking Performance Potential

By Daniel Schoonmaker

GRAND RAPIDS — John had reached a low point in his career.

“There were times when the ideas and creativity came really easy,” said the director of marketing and communications for a major West Michigan manufacturer, who preferred not to be fully identified. “Sometimes, I’d be working on a brochure or something, and the words would come naturally.”

But other times, and increasingly so, he’d find himself struggling against deadlines — “forcing ideas,” he called it — and settling for work he knew wasn’t his best.

“I felt it could have been better, that I could have a better end-of-the-line impact.”

John found himself in the office of Steven Hamming, a 16-year clinical psychologist with an expertise in performance barriers. Through sessions with Hamming, John discovered that many of his current hindrances stemmed from events in his early childhood, as far back as 3 or 4 years old.

“I had been taking on this burden of helping my family, and I didn’t know it but I’d been carrying it throughout school and into my career,” he explained. “I wasn’t conscious that I was holding onto this ... over-responsibility.”

He started to think about his work differently. Was the pressure he was feeling coming from his superiors? Or was it internal pressure?

He found that he could slow down, breathe and take his time with his work, and his productivity and creativity improved.

“This pressure I was feeling wasn’t from my bosses or anything like that,” John said. “It was from me and dealing with my family way back when I was real young.”

Another example has Hamming out of his office and out on the softball diamond.



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Steven Hamming helps everyone from dancers to writers to Web designers with overcoming professional performance issues.

Hamming, an outfielder on a pair of fastpitch softball open division national championship teams (Priority Mortgage and Planggers Furniture), occasionally finds himself by the pitching mound during pre-game warm-ups.

“Every sport has its own particular most vulnerable player,” Hamming said. “In hockey, it’s the goalie. In fastpitch softball, it’s the pitcher. And most of them need help. I can see him go from gripping the ball, to *gripping* the ball. You’d think he could put his fingers *through* it.”

Hamming tells the pitcher to warm up with his eyes closed.

“You don’t need to see it, just pitch and feel it with your body. Focus on your body.”

Hamming markets his service as Sports Optimal Performance and Creative Optimal Performance. He’s worked with writers, artists, dancers, singers and Web designers. Other recent clients include a videographer who needed help imagining a music video, and an actor with problems identifying with a character.

Most people don’t recognize the depth of performance issues, Hamming said. When someone hits a slump — whether creatively, athletically or professionally — the most common solution is to push harder.

But even if that works, it might not keep working.

Hamming’s favorite example is Steve Sax, the former All-Star second baseman and NL Rookie of the Year. Sax, who played for the White Sox, Dodgers and Yankees, developed in his second season what sports psychology calls the “yips,” a bizarre affliction that turns something natural — in Sax’s case, throwing the ball from second to first base — into something harrowing.

“He’d done it for 20 years, and then something happened here.” Hamming points to his head. “Nothing happened with his arm, but all of a sudden he couldn’t get the ball to first base anymore.”

Sax wasn’t an isolated case. In Major League Baseball alone, he’s joined by Chuck Knoblauch, Dale Murphy and Mackey Sasser to name a few.

“Whether creative or sports performance, everything that leads up to that particular moment of performance — the accumulation of all of life’s performances — all filter in there somehow,” Hamming said.

In some cases, these experiences have a sum total that is positive and liberating. But for perhaps a larger percentage of people, these experiences are burdensome and stifling, sometimes shameful or threatening. This state can manifest itself as depression or other conditions, and sometimes, as with John or Sax, a debilitating condition.

On the athletic field, these afflictions are glaringly obvious. When watching sports like basketball or baseball, where the stress and frustration is plainly visible on an athlete's face, Hamming joked that he wishes he could throw business cards onto the field.

"It's easy to decipher the need," he said. "If someone excels at practice and there is a contrast when they get to the game, you know it's not technical problems; it's between your ears."

To some degree, coaches recognize the problem, he said, when they yell advice like, "Concentrate!" or "You need to focus!" The athlete, however, is thinking: "What am I focusing on?" and "How exactly do I learn to concentrate and focus?"

"They've got the idea," Hamming said of coaches. "But they don't know how to get them there."

For the first decade of his career, Hamming lived "un-integrated" as a psychologist by day and an athlete by night. He began studying sports psychology in the early 1990s to better understand his own competition and desires. Seven years ago, he began to apply that expertise in his practice, first with athletes, and then with artists and creative professionals.

Of late, he has begun helping a large variety of professions and believes this therapy would be valuable to managers, salesmen and saleswomen, trial attorneys, health-care professionals, emergency responders and many others — any occupation where there is pressure, performance, potential for anxiety, and self-evaluation.

"Performance is performance," he said. "A lot of the same psychological and emotional factors that go into sports also go into creativity. The principles — the emotional truths of being human when we're at our best — are pretty broadly applied."

With that, Hamming explained that performance issues go hand-in-hand with other common mental afflictions. Sexual difficulties are a common complaint, he explained, and share the same anxieties as any professional or athletic task. Clinical depression is another frequent manifestation.

"That's really the issue and why I feel great working with athletes, professionals, or whoever it is," Hamming said.

"This usually isn't contained to the stage, field or workplace. ... It's pretty likely that is also how they are going to parent, relate to their significant other. ... If I can help an athlete become focused, mentally tough, and develop this inner coach, that person is going to benefit everywhere in their life, not just on the field."

Like his traditional clinical practice, Hamming's therapy is an exploratory process. It starts with talking through the performance issues, as well as related parts of the patient's life. He also employs a psychotherapy technique known as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR).

According to the EMDR International Association, when a person is very upset, the brain cannot process information as it normally does. Some traumatic events will provoke intense emotional reactions when triggered by sights, sounds, smells, thoughts or body sensations.

EMDR uses bilateral stimulation (involving both sides of the brain) through eye movements, auditory tones and hand taps to help facilitate an “adaptive resolution” and understanding of the affliction.

“There is an unfreezing of the way things get stuck in the brain,” Hamming said. “Beliefs, experiences, meanings are allowed to process differently.”

Hamming hopes to offer his expertise at a pro bono seminar to area coaches and high school athletic teams.