

# Go with the flow: Run with the idea of using focused exercise as a tool for creative thinking

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## Creativity

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**When we exercise we enhance our mental faculties and thereby boost our capacity for problem-solving. Coaches can exploit this, using the act of running, cycling or swimming to improve their athletes' – and their own – focus, inventiveness and decision-making skills.**

I will let you into a little secret. Virtually every one of my headlines for ConnectedCoaches – and a quick search tells me this is [the 119th blog](#) I have posted in the community – originated while I was on a run or out riding my bike.

It is when I am pounding the pavements or pushing the pedals that my brain is most hyper-alert, not sitting hunched at my desk midway through my fifth coffee of the morning.

If you are sceptical about using exercise as a tool to boost cognitive function, I challenge you to conduct your own simple experiment on the benefits of [flow](#) (that is 'the mental state of operation in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, and full involvement in the process of the activity').

Visualise a coaching dilemma that has been troubling you next time you are out jogging or doing lengths in the pool and your blood is pumping.

When you have settled into a breathing pattern and find yourself drifting into 'the zone' – with a narrowed point of focus, and with your mind uncluttered from all your usual ruminations – the chances are a workable solution will pop into your head.

I'm convinced I am not alone in having experienced these light bulb moments. For me, I have used running and cycling as a handy support mechanism to inform which angle to take for an article, to help with constructing an introductory paragraph or when I need inspiration for a catchy headline – “maybe in future you should run a bit faster or for a lot longer,” I hear you mockingly cry – but the point is, there are a wealth of exciting ramifications for coaches who embrace the concept.

### **Turn frustration into inspiration**

Just think for a moment...

Maybe you are a fan of [games-based learning](#) and have tried modifying one of your tried and trusted exercises to help you meet a specific learning objective for your under-14 football team.

You are keen to improve your players' one-touch passing but perhaps the task you used so effectively last season isn't working quite as well now the players are a year older and maturing at different rates, with the range of abilities having noticeably widened.

You have tried further reducing the size of the playing zone, experimented with the number of players on each side, how many touches or steps they are allowed to make before passing the ball, telling some players they have to use their 'wrong' foot etc.

You have floated around some ideas for how to improve the process – conscious too of the need to engage and challenge every player in your squad – but the jigsaw pieces just aren't fitting together as you would have liked.

Get on your running shoes and be pleasantly surprised at how ideas begin to fall into place, moulded and manipulated by an unseen hand. You may even have a Eureka moment.

Or get your players involved in the experiment. Put the onus on them to think of a few creative ideas. Give them some 'homework' and tell them you want them to go for a one or two-mile run during the week. Point their brains in the right direction and ask them to think how they might adapt the exercise to challenge themselves to make better use of their skills.

Then implement the changes and reflect to assess the impact of those ideas.

Of course, this is just one hypothetical scenario. At the very least, it should help you prioritise your ideas and bring them into sharper focus.

The possibilities, though, are boundless.

### **Neuroscience or psychobabble?**

According to an [article by the Scientific American](#), the hippocampus – a part of the brain responsible for learning and memory – is triggered during exercise.

‘When the neurons in this structure rev up, research shows that our cognitive function improves,’ it states, which explains our heightened ability to think clearly.

But don't get too bogged down with the science.

Common sense also tells us that increased blood flow means increased oxygen to the brain, stimulating the old grey matter and boosting our brain performance.

And with the added bonus of a clutter-free mind, it allows you to think freely and direct all your attention to one thing, allowing the creative juices to flow as fast as your bloodstream. A canny form of meditation through exercise.

And any technique that improves the quality of learning has to be a good thing, right.

Musicians advise budding song-writers to always have a notepad handy for when inspiration strikes.

Coaches should adopt the same habit. The next time you return home from a swim, run or bike ride, write down your newly-acquired ideas prior to taking your first gulp of tap water or switching on the shower, before you have chance to slip out of your Zen-like state of mind.

Done regularly it will ensure flashes of inspiration are not flashes in the pan.

**Am I exaggerating the usefulness of exercise as a tool for coaches or can you see opportunities worth exploring? Please let me know in the box below.**

### **Further reading**

[Creativity in Coaching: Why coaches should adopt a more creative approach](#)

[Let the creative sparks fly](#)

[Banging the drum for music as an instrument for athletic improvement](#)

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