MENTAL STABILITY - What does it mean and how to achieve it

Talking about mental stability of course focuses on a positive state of mind thus resulting in a good performance.
The status that we are looking for is called „Readiness for performance" and from this status we have a chance to shift to the status of „FLOW" as described by CSIKSZENTMIHALYI (1975), a status in which the athlete gains the sensation of being in full command of the situation and having all the time in the world for all actions due to an individual change in time recognition.

The performance of any athlete in this status is very good, sometimes remarkably beyond their regular capacity.
Unfortunately this status can be broken in the split of a second by either surprising developments in the challenge or by failure.

Therefore we are looking constantly to stabilize this status of good performance of our athletes and to put away flaws and/or failure without significant influence on their performing.

The most recent researches do lead to the level of self value of the respective athlete as the most decisive factor of the stabilization of performance.
Based upon an idea by HARTER (1978) a theory was created concerning the connection between successful performing and the level of self value of the respective athlete.
The effect seems to lead to three circuits of regulation that occur according to the situation of performing successfully or unsuccessfully.

Fig 1: Model of self value

The basic position is the motivation to show competence, which leads to activity.
The resulting action can be either successful which will lead to the positive circuit effecting more activity and higher levels of feeling of competence and thus self value, or the result will be failure, leading to frustration and thus starting a spiral circuit of less readiness to show competence resulting in less activity and ending in drop out.
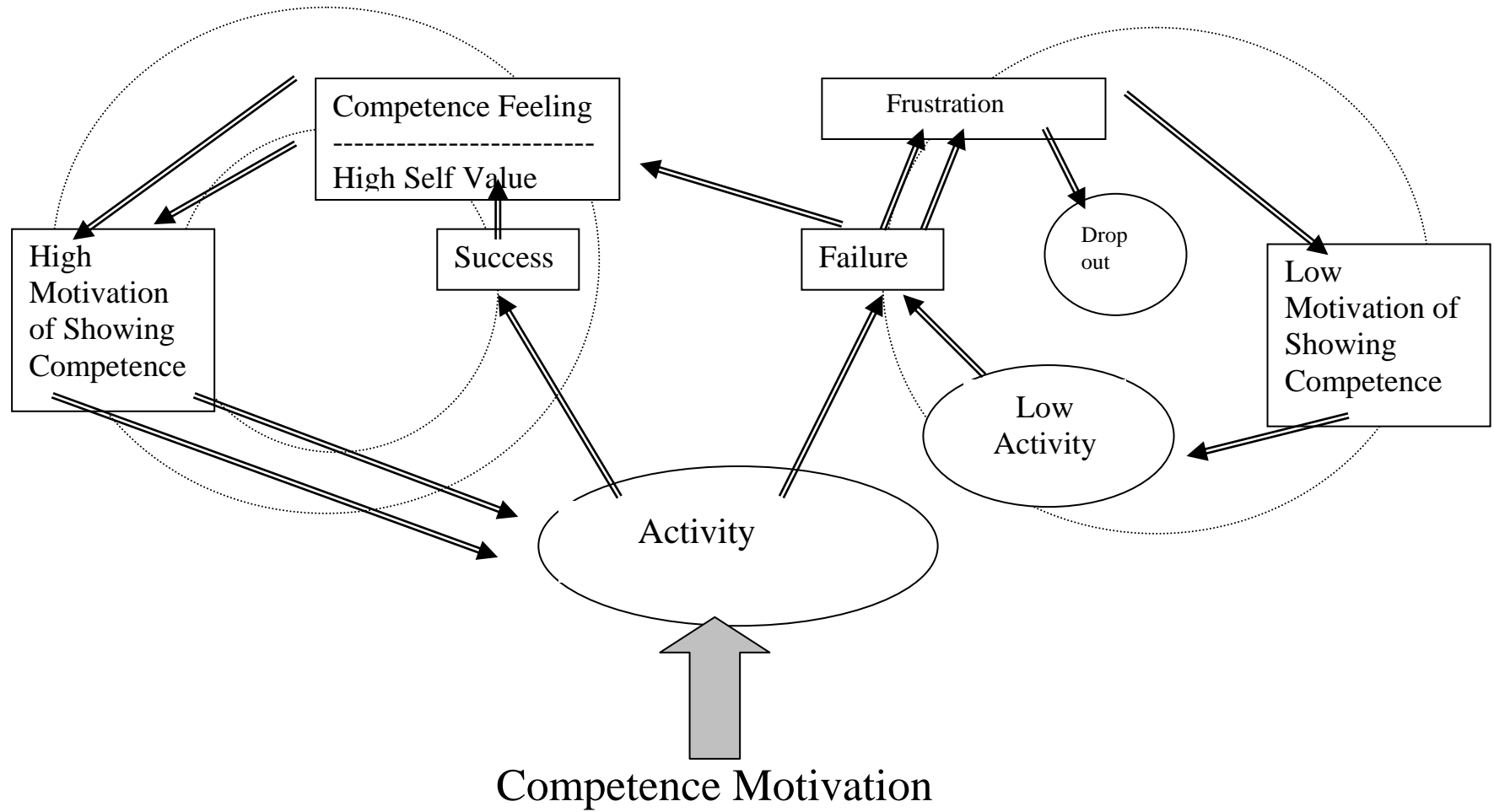So one might think that is a mere matter of the outcome of the first activity deciding the further direction of the process.
And furthermore, even if a number of positive activities will feed the positive circuit, the very first experience of failure will destroy the overall performance.
And here it is where we define mental stability.
If we have an athlete following this procedure that was mentioned above – any failure will lead to the negative spiral circuit – we will call this athlete mentally instable.
Mental stability means that the athlete will react in case of failure with the full statement of personal self value : „I can do much better and I will demonstrate this." The higher the level of self value of the athlete is, the more failed actions can be taken without loosing fighting spirit and motivation of demonstrating confidence which will lead to further and thus give yet another chance to succeed.

Competence Feeling

High Self Value

High Motivation of Showing Competence

Success

Frustration

Drop out

Failure

Low Motivation of Showing Competence

Low Activity

Activity

Competence Motivation

The very big challenge is now to establish a high level of self value in the mind of the athlete.

In order to achieve this we have to move towards cognitive learning which is one part of the overall system of learning.
Different from mere conditioning cognitive learning is indispensable for the change of behavior and/or habits.
This means that the athlete in question must have an idea of the direct connection between the action and the outcome and has to be able to understand that the outcome is a function of the action.
The duty of the coach is to trigger this mental bridge, especially in case of failure.
This is done by the simple question: "What did you do? ", and in case the athlete was not aware of this by a demonstration of the respective action.
After doing this for several times the athlete will know that every now and then the coach will ask this question and will be prepared.
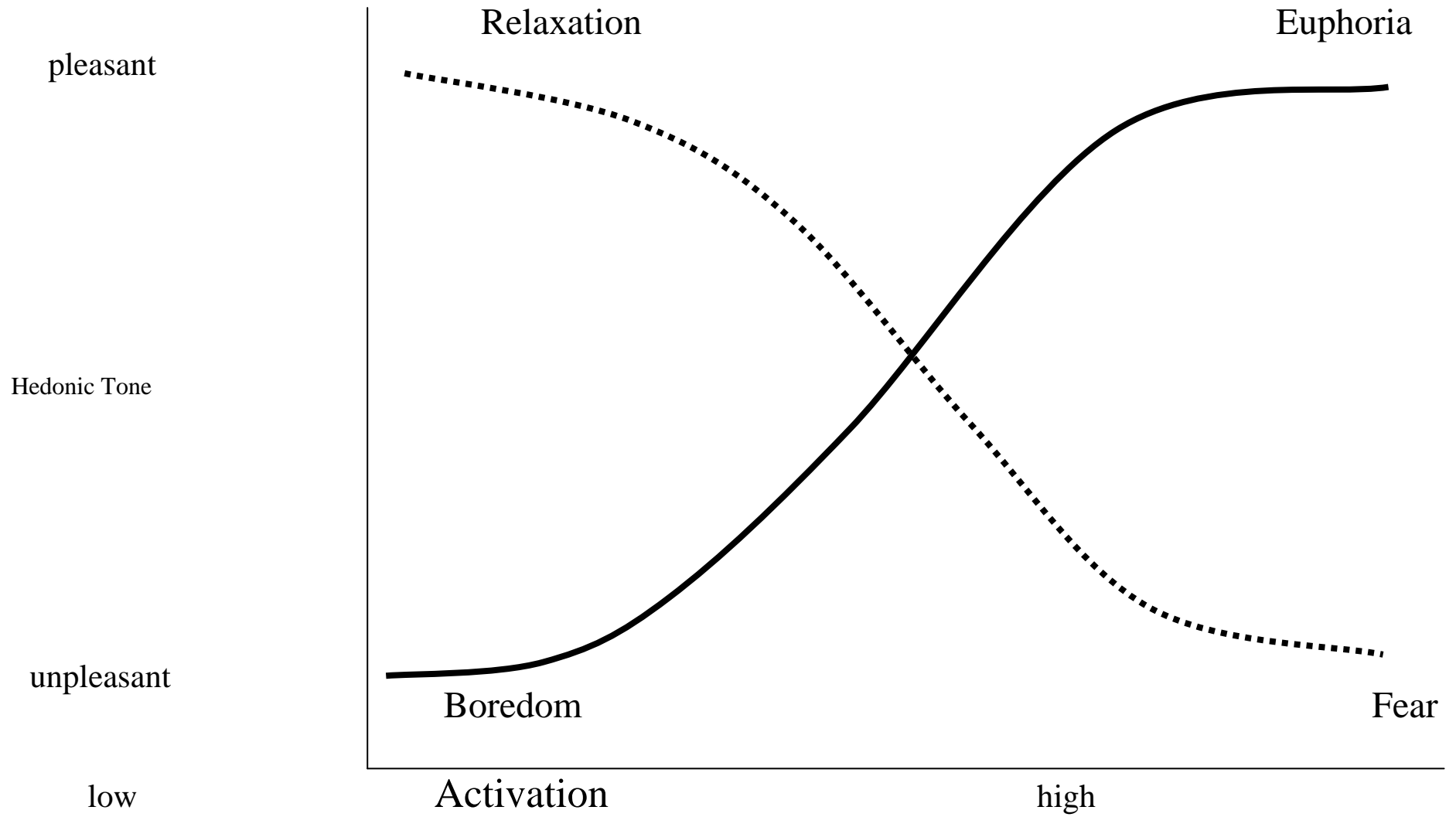This means that the athlete will develop a kind of feeling that I do call „self consciousness". Most probably a lot of actions will turn out successful because of the fact of improved attention and awareness of the situation thus leading from self consciousness to „self confidence". Self confidence will lead to some feeling of competence and the aim to demonstrate this competence. When the coach can manage the trick to let a number of these demonstrations end in success a certain level of self security will build up in the athlete automatically and this will give the targeted feeling of self value.
The crucial point is to find certain drills and configurations of tasks that will give a good chance for the athlete to be successful in showing competence. And the trigger question has to be asked irregularly – sometimes in case of success and sometimes in case of failure thus creating a token program for learning to achieve a high level of stabilization.

Fig. 2: Development of mental stability by cognitive learning

Self consciousness $\Longrightarrow$ Self confidence $\Longrightarrow$ Self security $\Longrightarrow$ Self value

Apter: Reversal Theory

Relaxation

Euphoria

pleasant

Hedonic Tone

unpleasant

Boredom

Fear

low

Activation

high

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