

Self-help is bullshit. Until it works. By Tom Chiarella

A Clean Mind

I am sitting in Jim Fannin's driveway in suburban Chicago. The airline has lost my bags. Last night I dropped \$1,400 playing \$20-\$40 hold 'em. I have written too many checks. Tonight my children will come home to an empty house. I have a four-hour drive ahead of me, with a blizzard setting in. And on top of that, I've been taking antidepressants that have made me gain weight. My life is shit. I look in the rearview mirror and take a deep breath. My eyes look puffy and ringed by dark circles. I'm here to meet Jim Fannin, whose job is to help me get in the zone.

As I sit in his driveway, this much is clear: I am not in the zone.

But they don't call Jim Fannin the Zone Coach for nothing. Fannin, a former tennis pro, is a "performance coach" who has worked with such professional athletes as Alex Rodriguez, Randy Johnson, Grant Hill, and Charles Howell III. He works to bring his clients—who also include day traders, bankers, auto execs—closer to that ethereal competitive state where Jordan and Tiger seem to bed down for years at a time, a frame of mind that Fannin defines as "performing completely in the now."

Fannin begins by running me through the acronym upon which his system is based: SCORE. *S* stands for self-discipline, *C* for concentration, *O* for...oh, who really gives a shit? Like most fairly well educated, openly ironic, presumably self-aware citizens of American life, I am highly suspicious of acronyms. The truth is, while Fannin is running me through this, I'm drawing circles on my pad.

Then he stops. "Your mind is in chaos," he says. "I felt that when you walked in." With a little prodding, I tell him a few of my troubles. "You're thinking too much," he says. I apologize. Fannin waves that off. The average person, he says, has two thousand

to three thousand thoughts a day. The average high-performing, zone-living professional athlete has more like a thousand to twelve hundred. "Their minds are clean," he says. "You can't get in the zone if your thoughts are anchored in the past."

"Do me a favor," he says. "Unhook your jaw."

It turns out you can't be in the zone if your jaw is tense. Think of Jordan's tongue wagging or A-Rod yawning at the plate. "Ali lost his mouth guard constantly," Fannin says, "because his jaw was loose and unhinged during the most heated moments of a fight."

Then he gets me to stand up, close my eyes, think a negative thought (where do I begin?), and drop my chin to my chest. He

✕ "Ask A-Rod what he does at the plate against any pitcher," Fannin says of his most famous client, "and I guarantee you he'll say, 'I hit solid with an accelerated bat head.' That's it. One moment. One thought."

makes me hold it there, then raise my head until I'm facing the ceiling. I repeat this three times. Strangely, I can no longer remember what I had been thinking about. "You rebooted your brain," he says. "When you look up, when your chin goes past parallel to the ground, the negative thought is released." So it's as simple as keep your chin up? Fannin smiles. "In some ways, yeah."

"Tell me about the poker," he says. Now this is easy. I start in—the beats, followed by the poor decisions, the downheartedness brought on by the sheer luck of the boneheaded bartender who called my aces and hit a set of threes. "I didn't ask about last night," he says. "If you're still thinking about last night, then

Need help finding the zone? Go to zonecoach.com for details on Jim Fannin's instructional CDs (\$30) and his Golf in the Zone seminars (\$875).



you're a million years from the now. You are coaching yourself. Great players play. They don't go back and think about everything they did wrong."

Then Fannin really gets going on poker. He gives me a dozen tips on reading opponents (concentrating, surprisingly, not on the jaw but on the eyes, the direction the head tilts, their very posture). Leave regret behind, he says. Don't worry a decision. Make it, then put the next tough one right back on your opponent. Tell yourself that you are the best player at that table. Give happiness only five seconds after victory, then leave it behind, too. Intuition is a tool that must not go unused. On and on. It's sharp stuff, not mathematical, but right-minded and useful. "How long have you played poker?" I ask.

"I don't play poker," he says. "This is about getting into the zone."

At this point I say: "What was that acronym again?"

Self-discipline. Concentration. Optimism. Relaxation. Enjoyment. SCORE.

I'd coaxed myself toward the zone all week. At one point I was hitting golf balls at the driving range. I found myself assessing each thought, each correction, and tossing it aside. With each swing, I tried to think less. I wanted a clean mind.

Fannin had suggested that I aim for a single blade of grass in my landing zone. I laughed when he said it, but the more swings I took, the more this comforted me. The target was so absurd, I never worried about missing. Truth was, after ten minutes I felt I was bearing in on it. I unhooked my jaw like mad.

Then I sat down to a game of poker with just four thoughts in mind: chin out, jaw loose, more intuition, fewer thoughts. I looked the table up and down, the usual crew from the Elks—firemen, farmers, insurance salesmen, secretaries. I reminded myself, as instructed by Fannin, that I was the best player at the table. And as I played, I tried to give up all sense of what had happened before and any sense of expectation.

Fannin insists that the best athletes use intuition as much as muscle, so he suggested that I try to visualize the other players' cards at the moment they look at them. "The picture is out there," he said. "They are projecting it. You just have to try to see it." So

at the start of every hand, I tried to tune in to an image of the winning cards. At first, I didn't think it was working. But soon I found myself making two moves: visualizing the hands, then betting or folding. It started to feel like a drum beat. One thought, then just one more. It felt like a clean mind, and I wouldn't let anything else in. And after two hours, I looked up as if from a long night's sleep, and glorioski if I'm not sitting on one large pile of chips.

Did I use my intuition more than usual? Hell, yeah. I was on a run. You can't do it any other way. But was I in the zone?

I don't know. As soon as I asked myself that question—before I could remind myself not to—I counted my chips. I was almost all the way back from the week before. That's when I felt something shift. Suddenly, I had too many thoughts. I wanted a beer. My dog was outside in the rain. I hadn't locked my house. The guy next to me smelled like pumpkin pie. My mind was in chaos again. I stood up and announced I was leaving. Out of the game. Out of the zone. No matter. If my time with Fannin was good for any one truth, it was that I could be back whenever I felt like it.