

## EMBRACING THE INTENSITY - CELEBRATING BIRTH AS A PEAK BODILY PERFORMANCE

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Rhea Dempsey

**T**here is power in women's bodies given expression in a variety of endeavours. They embrace the power of achievement; endurance; beauty; strength; movement; surrender; triumph; creation and transformation. In expressing this power women are challenged to work with the pain of their bodies straining and striving. The dancer, athlete, aerial performer, swimmer, birthing woman all push beyond existing limits to experience their bodies in the intensity of peak performance. We are inspired and awed by this power and potency. We celebrate this achievement when we witness it as a peak performance. We celebrate all that we know has gone into the achievement: the determination; the commitment; the skill; the work; the hours; the pain. We know it takes *working with* pain to achieve peak performance. When we look on images of women's bodies in the full glory of their achievement we see this effort; this working with pain. Do we feel it's too hard and that she shouldn't have to suffer? Do we feel sympathy for her? Do we feel we should make her comfortable? Do we tell her she doesn't have to be a martyr? Would we dare rob her of her effort and achievement? No! We celebrate her *power!*

Acceptance of what I call *functional pain* goes with this territory of achievement and power. By functional pain I am referring to the physiological pain felt in a healthy body working well, but at levels of high intensity, beyond usual comfort levels, NOT pathological pain which comes from disease or injury. This idea of functional, physiological pain often gets lost when it comes to childbirth. Presently in our culture, childbirth is almost entirely associated with medical considerations. Pain in a medical context is generally seen as suffering, because it is associated with illness or injury. Pain in labour has by default also become associated with this negative context, rather than with the connection to achievement and bodily peak performance. A motivated woman who wishes to 'have a go at working with the pain'; to birth 'normally', 'naturally', 'from her own resources'

is challenged to work with pain! In this quest, pain is power. Birth in a medical context and the behaviours resulting from it can diminish her resources.

In this article I will explore working with pain in a different context - the context of achievement; of peak performance and see what wisdom and insight we can find to increase resources for birthing women. I have recorded interviews with women who use their bodies to strive for peak performance in:

- *Creative expression:* Beth Shelton - dancer, choreographer and community dance artist and Sharee Grinter, Andrea Ousley and Dorota Scally -members of the Women's Circus.

- *Physical performance:* Marathon Swimmer Tammy Van Wisse and

- *Sporting achievement:* Joyce Brown OAM, Coach, Sport Commentator and Speaker.

They have all confronted the challenge of working with pain. They are not fearful of this pain, but rather embrace it as a 'normal' part of their quest for peak performance. Beth expresses this accepting attitude towards pain in the following comments:

*"The creative process engaged with at any depth implies pain because almost always whatever it is takes you beyond your comfort zone. You actually can't create anything without it doing that. The labouring woman is just a beautiful paradigm...of the creative process, a beautiful way of being able to clearly see what it takes to create".*

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### The Notion Of Normal Functional Pain.

For all these women, pain was an expected and accepted aspect of striving to achieve. To embrace this concept they needed preparation and support. Working with and through pain requires attention to all aspects of being: body, mind and spirit. As Childbirth Educators we too need to draw women's attention to all aspects of their being in order to increase resources for birthing.

- Physical - Emotional Link

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