



The Inside Man Performance Coaching For Poker Pros

Top performance coach **Steve Ward** has teamed up with some of the UK's top poker pros to see if he can help them take their game to new levels with his psychological expertise.

Over the coming weeks, in the lead up to and through a busy September of Poker in London, with the WPT, WSOPE, UKIPT Finals and EPT, I am going to be working with three of PokerStars' top pros – JP Kelly, Jude Ainsworth and Julian Thew - providing them with performance coaching and psychology support. I will be using approaches and strategies similar to those that I would use with the sports people, financial traders and sportsbettors who I work with in helping them to maximise their performance potential. My role is not to teach them how to play poker but to help them to be able to play their A-game as consistently as possible and to raise their performance levels over time through teaching performance and psychological skills and strategies.

The programme will run over what is a relatively short time frame, which has an upside of creating an immediate focus, but with a downside that it often takes a longer time than this for people to absorb and integrate any new approaches into their performance effectively and consistently. With this in mind it will be important to set some realistic and clear short term objectives with

the guys, within a wider context of helping them to improve their game in the long term. Over the coming issues I will be writing about the work I have been doing with JP, Julian and Jude: what their objectives are, the approaches and strategies we will use to achieve them, and ultimately, how they fare.

The First Steps

I first met with JP, Jude and Julian during the UKIPT in Edinburgh. The guys' focus in Edinburgh was obviously on the tournament so my aim was to get a little bit of time with each of them with the key objectives being:

1. Meeting face-to-face, establishing a relationship and finding out more about them and their game.
2. Telling them more about what performance and psychology coaching has to offer; explaining what it is and isn't, and talking about how we could best work together over the coming weeks.
3. Introducing a couple of key performance models that would be the basis of the work we'd be doing together.
4. Gathering information on how they felt they were currently performing in relation to their potential or desired level of performance.

5. Establishing specific areas to focus on.
6. Seeing the guys in action at the felt.
7. Setting up a time frame to work together beyond Edinburgh.

Two Key Performance Models

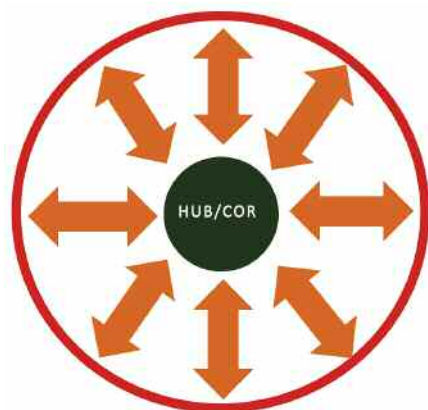
After spending time with the guys and working through these points, I introduced them to two key models which I have outlined below. And although I showed these models to JP, Julian and Jude, you may find it useful to work through them for yourself and your own performance.

5 Key Areas of High Performance



My model of high performance is shown below with five key components. I believe that a lot of performance potential is established in the preparation and planning stage, which includes learning, practice and lifestyle, and that you can either set yourself up for success or failure before you even get to the felt/screen. During performance, correct decision making under pressure, staying focussed and avoiding tilt is key. Evaluation and record keeping are essential if you are to keep improving your game, and is a key part of creating forward momentum – sustaining high performance. At the heart of everything though is mindset – this is the catalyst that determines what you do in the other four components and how much of your potential you will ultimately achieve. It includes your levels of motivation, confidence, focus, resilience, your attitudes to wanting to improve and importantly your beliefs and attitudes about yourself, success, money and poker.

The High Performance Hub



The next model is concerned with looking at when you are performing at your best and when you are not, and what it is that stops you from doing so. When you are at your best you are in the hub, you are in the zone as they say in sports, but what happens when you are not, and you get sucked out towards the rim? What are the factors that pull you away from the hub? How do you get back to the hub? These are key questions and when it comes to peak performance, identifying the distractions, interference and obstacles that stop people playing to their best are often uncovered here.

Working With The Players

Julian Thew

I met Julian on Day 1 where we talked about the coaching programme, Julian's background in international canoeing, his

journey into poker and to being a part of the Team PokerStars Pro team, and his thoughts and perceptions around his current level of performance and his goals for the future. It was interesting to hear that Julian has previously seen two sports psychologists in the past regarding his poker, which indicated his openness to these types of approaches and his commitment to becoming the best player he can.

The key theme that emerged from our discussion was that Julian feels he is currently performing below his best. I asked him to scale from 1 – 10, (where a 10 is his previous best ever level of performance) where he felt he was currently performing. He scored himself a 5. Based on this we have established our key goal as aiming to increase that number to as near to 10 as possible by the time the EPT London comes at the end of September. Identifying all of the elements of when Julian is at his best and working to put them all in place and assessing to see whether anything may be holding him back will be the key strategies employed.

Jude Ainsworth

Jude and I met before the start of Day 2 after breakfast. We spoke about his background and PhD in biochemistry, life in Ireland and his poker career to date including his SCOOP win. Jude appears to have a fantastic ability to play online poker and often plays a large number of tables at any given time making quick decisions from moment to moment for extended periods of time, but feels that his live game is not at an equivalent standard at present.

The outcome that Jude would like to achieve from the coaching is to be able to bring his live game up to the standard of his online game; specifically he would like to reduce the times when impatience and frustration can get the better of him, especially when he is left short stacked having had a large stack. This is a classic case of being pulled to the rim and out of the hub.

JP Kelly

JP was the last of the three I met with, again on Day 2 of the tournament. JP is a young player who has obviously got a large amount of potential and has already had big successes in winning bracelets at the WSOP and WSOPE. JP told me that he has had a tough period of downswing this year, and that being able to cope with such periods more

effectively would be really useful for him not just right now but also going forward.

We talked about what JP would like to achieve from the programme and the two themes that emerged were to look at ways in which he can start playing his A-game more consistently, to get back some form, to be in the hub more frequently, and on the flipside to learn some techniques and strategies for dealing with downswings. The goal is to get JP into the hub - to help him understand and learn ways of getting into the hub even during periods of downswing.

Coach's Thoughts

I found spending the four days at the UKIPT in Edinburgh very useful in terms of seeing a tournament run from start to finish, in meeting JP, Julian and Jude and in gaining a further understanding of the mental, emotional and physical demands of poker.

In the guys we have a great mix - three very different people, with very different backgrounds and journeys into poker, and three different coaching outcomes to work on.

What Happens Next?

Following on from Edinburgh and our initial conversations I have asked Julian, JP and Jude to complete a performance review and analysis to further help them identify and clarify some key actions that will move them towards the goals we have discussed. We will then be in a position to start the coaching process, working together to move them towards their desired outcomes and improved performance.

Catch up with us next month to find out how the guys are faring with the programmes and if they feel there is any notable improvement in their game.

Steve Ward is a leading performance coach who works with people in results driven high pressure environments such as sports trading, gambling, gaming and sales. His key areas of focus are on developing key performance skills, a winning psychology and providing lifestyle support.

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