

How the Best of the Best Get Better and Better

Compete only with yourself, demand relentless feedback, and don't forget to celebrate, says this sports psychologist and executive coach.

UNTIL 1954, MOST people believed that a human being was incapable of running a mile in less than four minutes. But that very year, English miler Roger Bannister proved them wrong.

“Doctors and scientists said that breaking the four-minute mile was impossible, that one would die in the attempt,” Bannister is reported to have said afterward. “Thus, when I got up from the track after collapsing at the finish line, I figured I was dead.” Which goes to show that in sports, as in business, the main obstacle to achieving “the impossible” may be a self-limiting mind-set.

As a sports psychologist, I spent much of my career as a consultant to Olympic and world champions in rowing, swimming, squash, track and field, sailing, trampolining, and judo. Then in 1995, I teamed up with Olympic gold medal swimmer Adrian Moorhouse to start Lane4, a firm that has been bringing the lessons from elite athletic performance to *Fortune* 500 and FTSE 100 companies, with the help of other world-class athletes such as Greg Searle, Alison Mowbray, and Tom Murray. Sport is not business, of course, but the parallels are striking. In both worlds, elite performers are not born but made. Obviously, star athletes must have some innate, natural ability – coordination, physical flexibility, anatomical capacities – just as successful senior executives need to be able to think strategically and re-



late to people. But the real key to excellence in both sports and business is not the ability to swim fast or do quantitative analyses quickly in your head; rather, it is mental toughness.

Elite performers in both arenas thrive on pressure; they excel when the heat is turned up. Their rise to the top is the result of very careful planning – of setting and hitting hundreds of small goals. Elite performers use competition to hone their skills, and they reinvent themselves continually to stay ahead of the pack. Finally, whenever they score big wins,

top performers take time to celebrate their victories. Let's look at how these behaviors translate to the executive suite.

Love the Pressure

You can't stay at the top if you aren't comfortable in high-stress situations. Indeed, the ability to remain cool under fire is the one trait of elite performers that is most often thought of as inborn. But in fact you can learn to love the pressure – for driving you to perform better than you ever thought you could. To do that, however, you have to first make a *choice* to devote yourself passionately to self-improvement. Greg Searle, who won an Olympic gold medal in rowing, is often asked whether success was worth the price. He always gives the same reply: “I never made any sacrifices; I made choices.”

Managing pressure is a lot easier if you can focus just on your own excellence. Top sports performers don't allow themselves to be distracted by the victories or failures of others. They concentrate on what they can control and forget the rest. They rarely let themselves be sidetracked by events outside a competition. World-class golfer Darren Clarke, for example, helped lead the European team to a Ryder Cup victory in 2006, six weeks after the death of his beloved wife. Elite performers are masters of compartmentalization.

If you want to be a high flier in business, you must be equally inner-focused and self-directed. Consider one executive I'll call Jack. When he was a young man, wrestling was his passion, and he turned down an offer from Harvard to attend a less-prominent undergraduate school that had a better-ranked wrestling team. Later, after earning his MBA, Jack was recruited by a prestigious investment-banking firm, where he eventually rose up to the rank of executive director. Even then, he wasn't driven by any need to impress others. "Don't think for a minute I'm doing this for the status," he once told me. "I'm doing it for myself. This is the stuff I think about in the shower. I'd do it even if I didn't earn a penny."

People who are as self-motivated as Jack or Darren Clarke rarely indulge in

ARTICLE AT A GLANCE

- **Elite performers don't get distracted by the victories of competitors – or even by a death in the family.**
- **Superstars have an insatiable demand for honest, immediate feedback. But it must be constructive; stars don't engage in self-flagellation.**
- **Champions train with the competition to push themselves to new limits. They continually reinvent themselves – especially after they become the benchmark.**
- **Elite performers know how to party. But celebrating ranks ninth on their list of top 10 reasons for wanting to win.**

ity to switch their involvement in their endeavors on and off. A good way to do this is to have a secondary passion in life. Rower Alison Mowbray, for example, always set time aside to practice the piano, despite her grueling athletic-training schedule. Not only did she win a silver medal in the Olympics in 2004, but she also became an accomplished pianist in the process.

For top executives, the adrenaline rush of the job can be so addictive that it's difficult to break away. But unless you are able to put the day behind you,

Fixate on the Long Term

Much of star athletes' ability to rebound from defeat comes from an intense focus on long-term goals and aspirations. At the same time, both sports stars and their coaches are keenly aware that the road to long-term success is paved with small achievements.

The trick here is to meticulously plan short-term goals so that performance will peak at major, rather than minor, events. For athletes who participate in Olympic sports, for example, the training and preparation are geared to a four-year cycle. However, these athletes may also be competing in world championships every year. The inevitable tension arising from this complicated timetable requires very careful management.

Adrian Moorhouse's Olympic gold medal success in 1988 is a case in point. His long-term goal was to swim the 100-meter breaststroke in a time of 62 seconds, because he and his coach had calculated four years in advance that this time should be good enough to win the gold. Of course, Adrian thought about winning in the interim, but all of his training and practice was geared toward hitting a time of 62 seconds or better in the Summer Olympics in Seoul. He mapped out specific short-term goals in every area that would affect his performance – strength training, nutrition, mental toughness, technique and more – to make sure he achieved that ultimate goal.

Successful executives often carefully plan out their path to a long-term goal too. I once coached a woman I'll call Deborah, an IT manager who worked for a low-budget airline. Her long-term goal was to become a senior executive in three years. To that end, we identified several performance areas in which she needed to excel – for example, increasing her reputation and influence among executives in other departments of the company and managing complex initiatives. We then identified short-term goals that underpinned achievements in each performance area, such as joining a companywide task force and lead-

Star players focus on what they can control and forget the rest. They're masters of compartmentalization.

self-flagellation. That's not to say that elite performers aren't hard on themselves; they would not have gotten so far without being hard on themselves. But when things go awry, business and sports superstars dust themselves off and move on.

Another thing that helps star performers love the pressure is their abil-

as elite athletes can, you'll inevitably run the risk of burning out. Many leading businesspeople are passionate about their hobbies; Richard Branson is famous for his hot-air balloon adventures, for instance. However, even small diversions such as bridge or the opera can be remarkably powerful in helping executives tune out and reenergize.

ing an international project. Together we built a system that closely monitored whether Deborah was achieving the interim goals that would help her fulfill her long-term vision. It paid off. Two months short of her three-year target, Deborah was offered an opportunity to head up the \$12 million in-flight business sales unit.

Use the Competition

It's common in track-and-field sports for two elite athletes from different countries to train together. I was at a pre-1996 Olympics training camp for the British team where 100-meter sprinter and then current Olympic champion Linford Christie had a "guest" train with him. His training partner just happened to be Namibian Frankie Fredericks, a silver medalist who had been one of the major threats to Christie's Olympic crown.

World champion rower Tom Murray told me just how competing with the best inspired him to higher achievement. Murray was part of a group of 40 rowers selected to train together with the hopes of gaining one of the 14 spots on the 1996 U.S. Olympic rowing team. Because the final team was chosen only two months before the Atlanta games, this meant that the group of 40 trained together for almost four years.

As Murray recalled, one of the last performance evaluations during the final week leading up to the naming of the Olympic team involved a 2,000-meter test on the rowing machine. The 40 athletes took it in four waves of 10; Murray went in the third wave. During the first two waves, 15 rowers set personal best times, and two recorded times that were faster than anyone in the U.S. had ever gone. The benchmark was immediately raised. Murray realized that he needed to row faster than he'd anticipated. He ended up bettering his previous personal best by three seconds and subsequently made the 1996 team.

If you hope to make it to the very top, like Murray, you too will need to make sure you "train" with the people who will push you the hardest. I once coached an



executive I'll call Karl. He declined an opportunity to take a position as the second-in-command at a competitor's firm at twice his current salary. Karl passed up what looked like a standout career opportunity because his current company was deeply committed to coaching him and a cohort of other senior executives on how to become better leaders. Karl had a reputation for burning people out, and he realized that if he moved on, he would continue that pattern of behavior. He remained in the same job because he knew that his coach and peers would help him grow and change his ways.

Smart companies consciously create situations in which their elite performers push one another to levels they would never reach if they were working with less-accomplished colleagues. Talent development programs that bring together a company's stars for intensive training often serve precisely such a purpose. If you want to become a world-class executive, getting into such a program should be one of your first goals.

Reinvent Yourself

It's hard enough getting to the top, but staying there is even harder. You've won that Olympic medal or broken that world record or racked up more wins than anyone in your sport. So how do you motivate yourself to embark on another cycle of building the mental and physical endurance required to win the next time, especially now that you have become the benchmark? That is one of the most difficult challenges facing elite performers, who have to keep reinventing themselves.

Consider trampolinist Sue Shotton. I was working with her when she achieved the number one ranking among women in 1983 – that is, she was considered to be the best female trampolinist in the world. Yet she had still not won a world championship.

Shotton was determined to capture that title, and she left nothing to chance. She challenged herself constantly by working with specialists such as physiologists, biomechanists, and elite sports

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coaches who kept her up to date on cutting-edge thinking. She perfected new moves based on video analysis; she tried different ways of boosting her energy based on nutritional intake. Her efforts to find ways of staying ahead of fiercely ambitious competitors paid off when she won the world championship in 1984, becoming the first British woman ever to hold the title.

Shotton had an insatiable appetite for feedback—a quality I have seen in all the top business performers I have worked with. They have a particularly strong need for instant, in the moment feedback. One top sales and marketing director I worked with told me that he would never have stayed at his current position if the CEO hadn't given him relentless, sometimes brutally honest critiques.

If you're like the elite business performers I have coached, you too are hungry for advice on how to develop and progress. One word of caution, however: While it's good to feel challenged, you need to make sure that any feedback you get is constructive. If criticism doesn't seem helpful at first, probe to see if you can get useful insights about what's behind the negative feedback. Get more specifics. You should be able to see concrete improvements in your performance after getting detailed coaching advice.

Celebrate the Victories

Elite performers know how to party – indeed, they put almost as much effort into their celebrations as they do into their accomplishments. I once worked with a professional golfer who, as he worked his way up the ranks to the top of his sport, would reward himself with something he had prized as a young player – an expensive watch, a fancy car, a new home. These were reminders of his achievements and symbolized to him the hard work, commitment, and dedication he had put into golf for so many years.

Celebration is more than an emotional release. Done effectively, it involves

a deep level of analysis and enhanced awareness. The very best performers do not move on before they have scrutinized and understood thoroughly the factors underpinning their success. I saw that discipline in the Welsh rugby team, which I advised from 2000 to 2002. After each game, the team members made a special effort to highlight not only what they did poorly but what they did particularly well. They typically split into small groups to identify and discuss the positive aspects of their performance, so that they could focus on reproducing them in the next game. The exercise was a powerful way to build expertise – and self-confidence. Indeed, the most important function of affirming victory is to provide encouragement for attempts at even tougher stretch goals.

In business, where companies are pressed to meet quarterly earnings and stockholders are impatient, managers

they also know that partying must be deserved. Without victory, celebrations are meaningless.

The Will to Win

As the spectacle of the Olympics unfolds, it will be easy to be captivated by the flawless performance of elite athletes who make their accomplishments seem almost effortless. Such effortlessness is an illusion, though. Even the most youthful star has typically put in countless years of preparation and has endured repeated failures. But what drives all these elite performers is a fierce desire to compete – and win. Even so, most of those participating in the Olympics this summer will walk away from the games without grabbing a single medal. Those with real mettle will get back into training again. That's what truly separates elite performers from ordinary high achievers. It takes supreme, almost

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must consider the timing and duration of the celebration. Dwelling on success for too long is a distraction and, worse, leads to complacency. Celebrate – but push on. Don't get stuck in the rituals of success. At the end of the day, getting to the next level of performance is what celebrating is really all about.

Smart companies know how to manage the tension between celebrating and looking hungrily for their next achievement. One UK mobile telecom provider puts on an annual ball for its people – spending over £1 million a year. The company hires out well-known venues and brings in pop bands to entertain all the employees. But one factor in the company's success is that its managers know that partying comes number nine on the list of top 10 reasons for wanting to win. Like all elite performers,

unimaginable grit and courage to get back into the ring and fight to the bitter end. That's what the Olympic athlete does. If you want to be an elite performer in business, that's what you need to do, too.

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