

# How the Best of the Best Get Better and Better

Compete only  
with yourself,  
demand  
relentless  
feedback, and  
don't forget  
to celebrate

By Graham Jones

**U**ntil 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.

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 relate 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.

## Love the Pressure

You can't stay at the top if you aren't comfortable in high-stress situations. While the ability to remain cool under fire is the one trait of elite performers that is most often thought of as inborn, you can actually learn to love the pressure—for driving you to perform better than you ever thought you could. To do that, you have to first make a *choice* to devote yourself passionately to self-improvement.

Consider one executive we'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 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 said. "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 this self-motivated rarely indulge in self-flagellation. That's not to say



that elite performers aren't 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 ability 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, as elite athletes can, you'll inevitably run the risk of burning out. Even small diversions such as bridge or the opera can be remarkably powerful in helping executives tune out and reenergize.

### **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 is to meticulously plan short-term goals so that performance will peak at major, rather than minor, events. For ath-

letes who participate in Olympic sports, for example, the training and preparation are geared to a four-year cycle, but these athletes may also be competing in world championships every year. The inevitable tension arising from this complicated timetable requires very careful management.

Consider Deborah, an IT manager who worked for a low-budget airline. Her long-term goal was to become a senior executive in three years. Along with her business coach, she 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. She then identified short-term goals that underpinned achievements in each performance area, such as joining a companywide task force and leading an international project. With her coach, she built a system that closely monitored whether Deborah was achieving the interim goals that would help her fulfill her long-term vision. 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. World champion rower Tom 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. 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, 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.

### Reinvent Yourself

It's hard enough getting to the top, but staying there is even harder. 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.

A quality seen in top business performers is a particularly strong need for instant, in-the-moment feedback. One top sales and marketing director said he never would have stayed at his current position if the CEO hadn't given him relentless, sometimes brutally honest, critiques.

One word of caution: 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.



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### 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.

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

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

### The Will to Win

It's easy to be captivated by the flawless performance of elite athletes who make their accomplishments seem almost effortless. But such effortlessness is an illusion. 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. And when they lose, those with the real mettle will get back into training again. That's what truly separates elite performers from ordinary high achievers. It takes supreme, almost unimaginable grit and courage to get back into the ring and fight to the bitter end. **TT**

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*Reprinted with permission of the Harvard Business Review. Graham Jones (graham.jones@lane4performance.com) is a cofounder of Lane4, an international performance development consultancy, and a former professor of elite performance psychology at the University of Wales. He is based in Princeton, New Jersey, and is the coauthor, with Adrian Moorhouse, of Developing Mental Toughness: Gold Medal Strategies for Enhancing Your Business Performance (How To Books, 2007).*

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