REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN PERFORMANCE FROM ELITE SPORT

What might we learn about human performance from elite athletes? Two elite rowers and a sport psychologist, who now share a focus on human and organisational performance in industry, reflect on what they've learned for HindSight readers.

The Elite Rowers' Perspectives

Cath Bishop

Sport has been a great training ground for all the opportunities and challenges that I have encountered throughout life. Three lessons in particular have shaped my working life since I retired from Olympic sport. First, sport taught me always to connect what I do on a daily basis to a wider purpose. Always ask yourself, "what gets you out of bed in the morning?" What makes each day worthwhile, not measured in terms of short-term goals and targets, but in terms of what difference can you make to others around you? I learnt to define success each day not just by how fast I went or if I beat other people around me, but by whether I brought the best mindset to what I was doing, how I behaved and interacted with those around me, and whether I supported myself and others to learn as much as we could.

Second, sport taught me how to be resilient by focusing on what I could learn each day and how I could continue to improve and grow even when things didn't go well. It's that constant learning mindset that creates the resilience to adapt, adjust and find a way through when adversity strikes.

Third, sport taught me the importance of connecting with those around you at a deeper level in order to explore the boundaries of what's possible together. It wasn't enough that we all shared the goal of going fast when we rowed in a boat together. We needed to understand each other beyond that, to know what our individual drivers were, our strengths and weaknesses, and out hopes and fears. This was needed to get the best out of each other, work together when the pressure came on and play to our strengths to perform to our potential.

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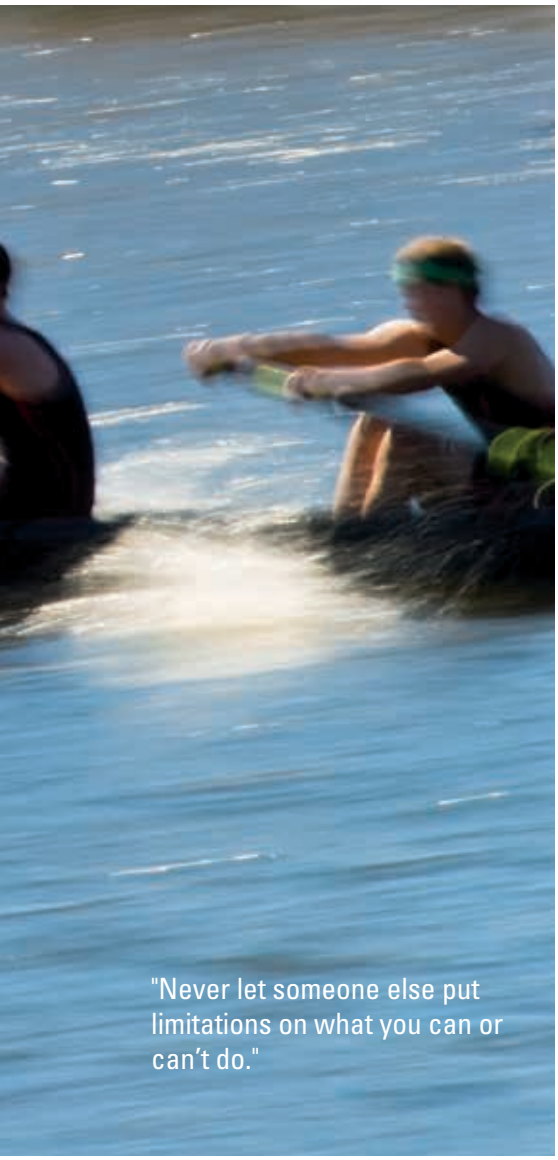
Over the period of a decade, training and competing at three Olympics, the most important lesson of all was to realise that success is not defined by medals or trophies. Those are great and I always wanted to deliver my best performance, but I realised that winning usually depends on a range of external factors beyond my control. Success was defined by: how much I stretched my own personal mental and physical limits on a daily basis; how I responded and reacted to the losses; the failures and the disappointments along the way; the impact I had on the athletes, the coaches and support team that I trained alongside; and the life-long friendships and bonds that I developed.



Cath Bishop competed at three Olympic Games in rowing, in Atlanta (1996), Sydney (2000) and Athens (2004), winning the World Championships in 2003 and Olympic Silver the following year. She also worked as a diplomat and now works as a business consultant, coach and speaker. 'The Long Win: The Search for a Better Way to Succeed' is published in October 2020.

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Ben Tipney

As much as I have learnt from my experiences in sport to my working life, we have to exercise caution when comparing high performance sport and the world of work. This is for a number of reasons, chiefly that as an athlete you spend in the region of 95% of your time 'preparing' for 5% of time spent 'performing'. Most people are 'performing' all day, every day in their workplace, with relatively little time put aside for 'preparing' (continuous professional development, training, coaching, etc.). This is an important distinction and why we need to be careful about directly applying performance strategies for the sporting world in the workplace.

What I can share is a couple of key lessons from elite sport about life in general as much as work. Firstly, never let someone else put limitations on what you can or can't do. At school I was the stereotypical 'skinny kid' who was never picked for sports teams and lacked confidence. Even when I started rowing at age 13, I was deemed too small for the 'A' crew. At the age of 16, when I professed a desire to row for my schools' first team one day, the response from my coach and peers was laughter and derision.

That conversation sticks with me to this day, but within 18 months (having left that school) I placed 2nd at GB National under 19 trials and ended up representing GB on several occasions. One point of satisfaction was that two of my peers from my schooldays who were deemed outstanding athletes were placed 98th and 112th at those same trials.

And so to my next point: I found proving people wrong to be a very powerful motivator. Unfortunately, that falls away once you achieve success and people start expecting high performance from you. So, beware of using others' perspectives and proving others wrong as your primary motivator. If you want to perform consistently, do it for yourself.

Because I gained so much confidence through my success in rowing, it became central to my identity as a person. As a consequence, success affected how I felt about myself and how I behaved towards others. This was almost entirely dependent on how I was performing. When I was performing well, I thought I was a cut above the rest, but I was a nightmare to be around! When I was performing poorly, I was incredibly hard on myself and depressive. I retired at 23 through injury and spent subsequent years coaching, initially in rowing and afterwards with teams in risk industries. I now realise the dangers of one's profession being such a singular point of focus. I now strongly advocate seeking balance when working in vocational careers (as can be found in aviation, healthcare, and other industries) that demand a lot of our time and energy.

My three key lessons would be as follows. First, never let anyone (others or yourself) place artificial limits on what you can achieve. Second, find out what drives and motivates you internally for long-term success. Third, devote time and energy to interests outside of your career.

Ben Tipney represented Great Britain in rowing between 2001 and 2005, and coached rowing professionally between 2005 and 2016, including coaching the South Africa Rowing Team in 2010 (World Championship Bronze). He has a BA (Hons) in leadership in sport and is certified by the British Psychological Society in Cognitive Behavioural Coaching. He teaches human performance and coaches high-performing teams outside of sport, with focus on healthcare.

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The Performance Psychologist's Perspective

Tom Young

I have been fortunate to work with elite athletes, spend time in high performance environments, and pick the brains of sporting leaders across the world. As a consequence, I am often asked what lessons we can take from the world of sport. These can be summarised as follows:

Curious

Due to the high-profile nature of elite sport, there is a tendency to place those who operate within it on a pedestal. The first thing I would say is that the very best athletes and sporting leaders are constantly curious. They have a genuine thirst for learning, development and improvement. I guarantee that if I put them in a room with the readers of *HindSight* who perform under the most extreme pressure, they would want to be asking the questions, not answering them.

The best elite athletes spend time with mentors and peers, visiting different environments and studying. They never stop learning. There is no finish line.

Human

When I started out as a newly qualified psychologist, I spent time at an English Premier League club. I think I expected them to be almost superhuman. I quickly realised this wasn't the case. Athletes are just human beings, who happen to be very good at what they do. They are people like you and me, with strengths and flaws, hopes and fears, limiting beliefs, and irrational thought patterns. High performance can be lonely, but once people feel strong and safe enough to show their vulnerability, they can start to grow.

Leadership for all

When researching my book 'The Making of a Leader', I was keen to test the widespread notion that leadership is reserved for the chosen few. In my consultancy work, I will often hear comments like "I'm not a leader" or "I'm not vocal enough to lead". However, from my interviews with head coaches from a range of team environments, I found many different characters and personality styles. The key is finding your style and method of leadership. You might be someone who leads by example, through quality and work ethic. Or you might be someone who leads through the enduring nature of the relationships and trust that you build. Do not underestimate your capability to lead.

Resilience

One consistent characteristic across sporting leaders is their own sense of resilience, a quality that can often be traced back to their formative years. In sport, one of the few things you can guarantee is that you will have setbacks and defeats. Each individual leader that I spoke to had 'failed' at one point or another. The leader cannot guarantee victory, but he or she can ensure they apply a rational mindset to both success and failure.

Reflection and learning

Regular reflection is another component of elite performers. They are always willing to learn lessons and evaluate themselves intrinsically before moving forward.

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Tom Young is a Performance Psychologist working in business and elite sport. He was recently part of the coaching team to PGA Tour and Ryder Cup golfer Tommy Fleetwood. He worked as a consultant to both the Belgian national team ahead of the World Cup in Russia, and the victorious European Ryder Cup team in Paris 2018. His book, 'The Making of a Leader: What Elite Sport Can Teach Us About Leadership, Management and Performance' is out now.

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The Air Traffic Controller's Perspective

Luis Barbero

COVID-19 and the different peaks and troughs we have experienced in air traffic has reminded me and my colleagues how our job as air traffic controllers is much more akin to that of athletes and sports people than to that of office workers. Every day, we have to perform to the best of our ability, applying the skills acquired during our training and perfected through experience.

But for that ability to be maintained, for our skills to be honed, we need to be professionally challenged by the traffic levels or the traffic scenarios we face. This pandemic and the drastic reduction in air traffic has resulted in air traffic controllers not being challenged as much as they normally are. The problem of skill fade, which most controllers would not have experienced in a long time given the increase in air traffic in recent years, has become a very real one. We might not be as sharp as we were back at the beginning of 2020, our thought process might be a bit slower or decisions might take that little bit longer to be made (and might not be the optimum ones).

In my environment, air traffic controllers have become fully aware of the effects of skill fading and are doing everything they can to minimise them. That will be particularly important when (not if) air traffic returns. Additionally, in the same way that athletes practise competition scenarios during their training or racing drivers immerse themselves in races in the simulator, it will be important for air traffic controllers to have access to simulators so they can hone their controller skills back to their peak level.

"Our job as air traffic controllers is much more akin to that of athletes and sports people than to that of office workers."

Luis Barbero is a Heathrow Approach controller at the Swanwick Area Control Centre (Terminal Control) in the United Kingdom. He is President and CEO of GATCO, the Guild of Air Traffic Control Officers.