

## How to train like an athlete at work

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*Whether you are in charge of a large team or work as an independent trainer, you can learn a lot from high performing athletes, says Keith Hatter.*

Today's workplace arena can be a tough environment, which shares a lot with the world of the elite athlete – intense pressure, tough competition, small margins for error and a high cost of failure. It's an arena where tough performance demands are made on key people and, in some ways, asks more of people at work than any demands that might be asked of the finest athletes – work longer, work harder, and deliver more in shorter time-scales and with fewer resources. So if you're going to have to perform like an elite athlete, it might be good to know what they know about performance.

### **It's all in the mind**

Professional athletes train 90% of the time and compete for the remaining 10% – quite a few business leaders we work with would swap for that sort of balance! Since that's not usually on offer, the next best thing is to learn everything we can from the way athletes prepare. The top level performers are superb at understanding the environment in which they perform, at understanding the demands and the pressures they face, and are also very aware of their strengths, their weaknesses and all the resources that they have available to them to respond. Armed with this vital knowledge of the demands they face and the resources they control, elite athletes are able to plan and prepare with great consistency and maximum impact.

This means that athletes don't spend time focusing on what they can't do (unlike many corporate personal development plans) or on things that they can't control (ditto). Instead, they focus on the things they have control over which, if done repeatedly, will maximise their chances of success. Often this is a very simple strategy, though one that is not always easy to deliver, especially when many leaders and managers are so obsessed with measuring and reporting on targets. This would be the equivalent of a sports coach constantly asking the team: "Are we going to win this week?", "What will the score be?", "How much will we win by?" etc. and failing to identify the things the team can do to maximise their performance.

When you fully understand the demands placed upon you, when you are able to distinguish between those demands and when you understand your own performance recipe, then you know that it is impossible to perform at 100% all the time. Even an elite athlete such as Roger Federer knows that over the course of a season there will be times when he'll have to perform at his best and times when he won't need to. His coach will also know this and as a team they will work together to recognise when to up the intensity and focus, and when to relax slightly – contrast this with the demands that some managers place on staff, or the demands people place on themselves.

### **It's not all work, work, work**

Elite athletes also recognise the importance of rest and recovery. This doesn't mean they take things easy, it's more that athletes recognise that rest and recovery is something that can also be a part of the competition, and if they can do it better than their opponent, then they can get a truly competitive edge.

Federer personifies elite performance through intense, sustained and consistent excellence, making an incredible 23 straight grand slam semi-finals. His phenomenal record is made all the more impressive

by the fact that the next best record is that of Ivan Lendl, who has appeared in 10 straight semi-final appearances. Ten is pretty good, that's two and a half years of being in every grand slam semi-final, but Federer is now at almost six years running without missing a semi, which is testament to his incredible all-round ability – physical resilience, physical readiness, mental toughness, unshakeable confidence, and his incredible technical and tactical abilities.

Throughout his career he's had fantastic support from the people that matter most to him, and he's been able to adapt to different challenges. These include playing on a mixture of surfaces, differing weather conditions, against left handers, right handers, serve volleyers, baseliners, big servers, speed demons... the list goes on and on. Federer talked last year about how happy he is with the choices he has made about when to compete, when to train, when to rest and when to take holiday, which is another thing that helps elite performers in sport do what they do.

Athletes maintain a strong sense of choice over their options; a sense of choice that fuels their sense of control and autonomy, and their motivation. Even with the monotonous rigour of tough training regimes they internalise the motivation to be able to say with conviction "I choose to do this". In the corporate world, it is sometimes possible to feel trapped, even though most people start off in a job motivated. Reminding yourself of the choices you do have, either in what you think, what you choose to do or how you do it can help when dealing with long hours or pressing deadlines.

The more you take personal responsibility for your thoughts, your behaviour and your actions, the more your performance becomes a choice, and the more consistent you can become in an often inconsistent workplace. To meet your challenges, you need to become great at exploiting all the resources around you and available to you, not just your technical knowledge and tactical skills (though these are important), but also your mindset, your energy, support from those around you and the tools and equipment that you have available to you just like an elite athlete does. Just a few simple choices – test them out with intensity, passion and dedication and see what happens when you become an athlete at work.