

# Tough road for the business Olympian

Like elite athletes, business people must suffer if they want to achieve success, writes Jill Margo.

**S**uccess has to hurt. Olympic athletes know the pain of preparation and any person who wants to get to the pinnacle of a profession or business has to be prepared to suffer.

This is the view of Gavin Freeman, a senior sports psychologist at the Australian Institute of Sport who applies the theories of elite sport to business. "Imagine you've taken off your jacket and just sprinted 100 metres, at full thrust, down the street," he says.

"You'd be feeling overextended and tired, which is just how elite athletes feel most of the day. The pain you'd experience would probably mimic a third of the exertion that the average elite athlete feels on a regular basis."

Freeman says the challenge for the athletes is that they have to perform complex tasks consistently while experiencing this discomfort. To reach the absolute top in business, the pain is different but the pressure to perform consistently is the same.

While many athletes lecture on the business circuit and have written books about their success, Freeman says his approach is different. Athletes tend to present personal views from the perspective of their particular success. He looks behind success and deconstructs the process into all the little steps that make it possible.

"When people walk away from an inspiring talk by an elite athlete, they have a sense of euphoria. They feel good and think, 'I'll go and try that'," he says.

"I want them to walk away from my material with a headache. I want them to realise that it's a tough road, that there is a process that needs to be followed and that the gratification is not going to be instant."

A couple of years ago, Freeman was doing a presentation at JP Morgan when he made a remark that sparked the imagination of Dirk Rossey, then head of learning and development for the bank's Asia-Pacific region.

Rossey had been making a point about performance and said that while ordinary people aimed for any part of the bullseye, the rainmakers aimed for its centre. "But," Freeman replied, "that ain't good enough!"

As psychologist to Australia's Olympic archery team, he was talking from experience.

"Archers don't aim for the centre of the target," he says. "In some situations, they aim off the target face because of the wind. Because they have to take account of so many factors, they focus on the process. If they can ensure the process occurs absolutely perfectly, then the outcome takes care of itself."

Following this exchange and others like it, Rossey and Freeman joined forces and are writing a book on how to create business Olympians.

"If you compare the effort an athlete puts into becoming an Olympian with the effort a businessman puts into achieving real success, it's like comparing an accomplished professional with someone who is still in high school," Rossey says.

"Business training material is outdated and shallow compared to the sporting world, where the distinctions are much deeper and profounder."

Rossey says people who are successful at investment banking don't roll into the office at 9am. They're in the office by 7am and have done their basic research by 8am, before staff meetings begin and well before the markets open.

But much more than effort and dedication are required. Success requires such a person to be "in zone". He or she has to be prepared, calibrated and, like the archer, master of the process.

"When Schumacher drives around the track at 300 clicks an hour," he says, "he can see a pin on the road and, almost as if he's in slow motion, can avoid hitting it. It's as if he can slow time down. The same thing happens with a top trader in an investment bank."

"He can take in all the information that's happening around him and slow time down. In the midst of the flurry of information, with hooters going, he can stay connected and make the right decision. We also call it being in tune or on song."

In elite training, this state is referred to as IPS or ideal performance state, and knowing how to get into it is the key to success. Freeman says it is all about focusing on the process, rather than the result.

In sport, as in business, there are always one-hit wonders, people who have an

outstanding success and then fall off. They can't repeat the performance, Freeman says, because they don't know how they did it. They haven't focused on the process.

When people have a success in business, they celebrate. He says they don't analyse how it occurred. They only analyse when they have a failure. But in sports training, every small improvement is deconstructed to see how it can be built on.

Freeman says concentrating on the process helps give players confidence. These are people who are unstoppable as long as they get a good start. But if their beginning is marred, they can't recover.

If a competitor works out their weakness and can engineer a poor start, the competitor has a great advantage.

Freeman says elite athletes develop an armoury of skills to protect themselves against attacks on their process. This requires insight

and effort. They have to identify their weaknesses and turn them into strengths or find ways to hide them so they can't be exploited by opponents.

The same can be done in business. Over the years, Rossey has seen many a presentation fail not through lack of preparation or worth but because the presenter is thrown and can't recover. This can happen because someone is mindlessly tapping on the table or even because the presenter suddenly becomes aware his or her armpits are sweaty and feels self-conscious.

Knowing how to get in zone is only part of the challenge. Rossey says to perform consistently at a high level, you have to know how to protect yourself from psychological sabotage, so that you remain in zone.

"When someone remarks that you have sweaty armpits, if you're on top you say, 'Yes. I do. And I like it that way'."



Gavin Freeman, left, and Dirk Rossey are writing a book applying lessons learnt from elite sports to business.

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