

THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

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SURVIVAL IN THE WORLD OF ELITE SPORT HAS MORE TO DO WITH PAIN AND SACRIFICE THAN RICHES AND GLORY. SO WHY DO ATHLETES AND THEIR FAMILIES SUFFER AS THEY DO FOR A GAME?

Although he represented our country during one of the most thrilling and heartbreaking moments of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, very few Australians know the name David Rhodes.

Throughout most of the K2 1000m kayak final, Rhodes's boat led the pack; but for the last 250m, a neck-and-neck tussle ensued with the Swedish pair. As the amount of lactate in Rhodes's body increased so did the massive muscle pain, but he didn't miss a stroke. With just 10m to go, the unthinkable occurred: two trailing teams found a burst of extra energy and surged forward. Rhodes crossed the line in fourth place.

The 28-year-old Olympian came home without a medal; and without even enough money to take his girlfriend to dinner. Returning to his part-time sales job, he began his punishing training regimen again, determined to do better next time.

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

In the world of the elite athlete, it is perfectly normal to suffer enormous physical pain in order to reach a goal, explains Gavin Freeman, performance psychologist and founder of The Business Olympian, a series

of professional development workshops.

It is also perfectly normal to put up with major financial hardship; Freeman says the majority of Olympic athletes survive on grants and part-time work.

"I've had conversations with Olympians who've said to me: 'Attending the Games was an amazing experience, but all my friends have got cars and I don't have one. All my friends got to finish university and I'm still in first year'," Freeman says. "But at the same time, these athletes identify with what they're doing and develop quite strong, intrinsic motivation to achieve a goal."

Rhodes says he'd sacrifice almost anything for his sport. Much of the income he's able to produce from his part-time job is spent on the enormous amount of food required to fuel his energy needs. He relies heavily on fiancée Kasia Zdybel's steady income, and sometimes the generosity of family and friends, to get by.

"Financially it's pretty hard," says Zdybel, Rhodes's partner of four years. The 25-year-old is all too familiar with the sacrifices that come with being the partner of a professional sports person.

"It gets frustrating. We miss out on a ▷

This picture: Paul Briggs at a fight
in Melbourne, January 2002



social life and doing things like going out to dinner. By about 8.30pm, his eyeballs are hanging out of his head from exhaustion. But I make him promise me a weekend every two months, just so we can do something normal together," she smiles.

But it's the constant drive that Zdybel loves about her Olympian fiancé. "It's lovely to be with somebody who has goals in their life and is focused and constantly pushing himself to do the best he can do," she says. "He inspires me."

FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

In May, Australian boxer and ex-kickboxing world champion, Paul Briggs lost a title fight in Chicago. Just 10 seconds into the second round, a clash of heads opened a gash above Briggs's left eye. His opponent, Polish boxer Tomasz Adamek, had his nose broken in the third round and his right eye



was almost swollen shut by the sixth. Both boxers soldiered on until the end of the 12th round, refusing to give in to the pain.

Two days later, with five stitches above his left eye and a black eye on the right, Briggs smiles through bruised lips and reflects on the fight: "I'm really happy and I had a lot of fun. Although I didn't get the result I wanted, I don't see it as a loss; I see it as an amazing experience to draw from."

While the 29-year-old is now in the big league of boxing pay cheques, Briggs spent the past seven years with little to no income. Fortunately, his university-educated wife agreed to support the struggling fighter.

"We had to scrape up money to buy nappies for our first baby, but it all comes down to how much you want to back yourself," he says. Money is no longer an issue, but sacrifices in the name of sport never stop. "I have to sacrifice being away from my wife and kids for months at a time. And training is mundane and repetitive."



DESPITE THE SACRIFICES, ELITE ATHLETES FEEL A CALLING TO COMPETE — ONE WHICH IS SIMPLY TOO STRONG TO RESIST.

Then, of course, there's the pain. Briggs likens life as a boxer to being in a car crash: waking up every day feeling sore. He's always preparing for a fight that may never happen. The Chicago bout was postponed so many times that three months of intense preparation stretched to nine months. So what kept him going?

DRIVING FORCE

Elite athletes, Freeman says, see pain, sacrifice, and failure as building blocks for the ultimate success for which they've trained. "That drive to achieve a goal is incredibly strong. There are two types of motivation: people who are motivated to

Above: David Rhodes (right) and teammate Daniel Collins after the final of the mens K2 1000m at the 2004 Olympic Games, Athens
Above left: Cynna Neele representing Australia in the 2003 World Netball Championships

succeed, who see any form of failure as a stepping stone to their eventual success; and people who are motivated to avoid failure. Elite athletes are part of the former group."

Freeman says that while those in non-sporting occupations see many sports as 'just a game', the reality is very different for athletes. Sportspeople develop their own self-image from their sport, and as results are reported in the media, we, the public, measure the athletes by these performances. So the self-esteem, self-image, and self-worth of an athlete are put on the line every time they compete.

When his daughter Cynna was just 13, Tony Neele drove her three hours to



SHOW ME THE MONEY

Just as it is in the world of acting, there are 'haves' and 'have-nots' in the sporting arena. For those who make it to the top of the right sport, the rewards can be plentiful, as the top 20 sports earners in 2004 prove:

1. Tiger Woods (golf) \$US80.3 million (pictured below)
2. Michael Schumacher (motor racing) \$US80 million
3. Peyton Manning (American football) \$US42 million
4. Michael Jordan (basketball) \$US35 million
5. Shaquille O'Neal (basketball) \$US31.9 million
6. Kevin Garnett (basketball) \$US29.7 million
7. Andre Agassi (tennis) \$US28.2 million
8. David Beckham (soccer) \$US28 million
9. Alex Rodriguez (baseball) \$US26.2 million
10. Kobe Bryant (basketball) \$US26.1 million
11. Grant Hill (basketball) \$US25.9 million
12. Derek Jeter (baseball) \$US23.2 million
13. Barry Bonds (baseball) \$US22.7 million
14. Manny Ramirez (baseball) \$US22.1 million
15. Oscar De La Hoya (boxing) \$US22 million
16. LeBron James (basketball) \$US21.1 million
17. Vince Carter (basketball) \$US20.2 million
18. Dale Earnhardt Jr (motor racing) \$US20.1 million
19. Arnold Palmer (golf) \$US20 million
20. Phil Mickelson (golf) \$US19.8 million

Source: *Forbes*



Melbourne three times a week so the young netballer could compete. "I think we did 30,000km that year just for netball," he says.

"It put some financial stress on our family and was a huge time sacrifice, but her sheer achievement made it worthwhile. Cynna is now [unofficially] one of the top 20 players in the world and it's very satisfying to have been a part of that."

A member of the Australian netball squad, Cynna is also captain of the Melbourne Kestrels. Most days she does two training sessions. In her positions of goal attack and goal shooter, she often receives great praise for her accuracy; but off the court, it's far from champagne and roses.

Income from part-time netball coaching and Austudy saw Cynna through university, but she has now had to take a job at a youth hostel to make ends meet.

"I think I should have a sex change and [switch] sports if I want to make money," Cynna smiles. "[Netball's] top national

league players only earn between \$10,000 and \$12,000 each season."

Having completed a Bachelor of Business, the 23-year-old netballer is currently having a difficult time finding a job as many employers see her training and travel responsibilities as a drawback. It's frustrating for Cynna, but a sacrifice she's willing to make for her beloved sport.

Freeman says that although sportspeople often have a difficult life off the field, they go into the sport with their eyes wide open. Despite the sacrifices, they feel a calling to compete – one which is simply too strong to resist.

"It's a sense of pride and joy," Cynna explains. "Every time I'm out there playing for Australia and I hear the national anthem, I get shivers up my spine. You're doing something you set out to achieve years earlier. When I was little, I used to tell my dad that by the age of 21 I'd play for Australia, and I actually did it." 🗨️