

# THE SPORT IN BUSINESS

What can athletes bring to the world of business, and what can athletics teach us about being successful in business?

STORY ROB MCGOVERN

PHOTOGRAPHY CORBIS

“That boy could walk into any boardroom in America and command the room.” That was NBC’s American football commentator Chris Collinsworth talking about Russell Wilson, a quarterback for the Seattle Seahawks football team. Commanding the boardroom is the main goal for many aspiring businessmen and women. There are certain characteristics that all elite sportspeople possess that propel them to the top of their game. But are these attributes transferable to life outside sport and in the world of business?

Athletes start learning from a very young age about dedication, tenacity and hard work. Without them they would, as the vast majority of their contemporaries do, fall by the wayside. It doesn’t matter if it is football, polo, rugby, tennis or sailing, athletes who make it to the top of their sport share traits that have helped them prevail.

“I was always fascinated with the psychology of performance. I got invited to speak at conferences and I found I enjoyed it and started to make a second career out of it,” says Roger Black, a British Olympian who won two silver medals on the track at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. He eventually teamed up with fellow Olympian Steve Backley to start Backleyblack, a performance coaching service for businesses. “The key is to follow your passion. The same is true of business,” he says.

Former England international cricketer Matthew Hoggard, who now works for OSTC Foreign Exchange as a business development manager, says finding something that you’re passionate about will see you replace the sports buzz with a new one. “Landing a multi-million pound client or getting [Australian batsman] Matthew Hayden out at Lords is a different buzz, but if it’s a massive client or something you have had to work hard for, you can favourably compare them, particularly when you sign your first client or make your first trade.”

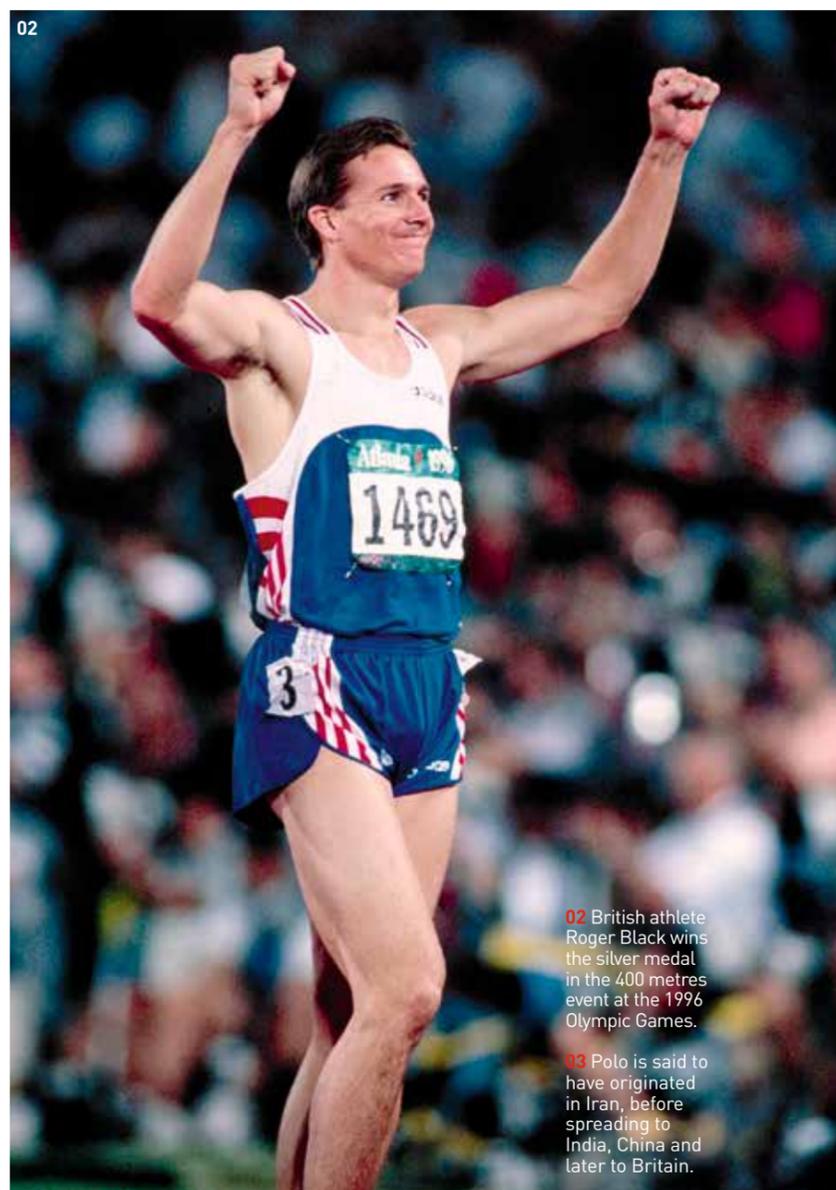
Veteran polo player Luis Lalor agrees. “Not getting that adrenalin rush that polo can give you is what I miss most,” he says, adding that in business, an adrenalin rush can come from being the leader in an organisation. Lalor was a professional polo player for 20 years, reaching a nine goal handicap in Argentina – an incredible feat. Today, he is the president of the Hong Kong Polo Development and Promotion Federation and general manager of Tianjin Goldin Metropolitan Polo Club.

#### RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Tenacity is a requirement for climbing to the top. Black says that everyone knows the recipe for success, but the ones who work hardest are more likely to achieve it.

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– Dr Steven Rynne, University of Queensland



02 British athlete Roger Black wins the silver medal in the 400 metres event at the 1996 Olympic Games.

03 Polo is said to have originated in Iran, before spreading to India, China and later to Britain.



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04 Luis Lalor (second from right), president of the Hong Kong Polo Development and Promotion Federation and general manager of Tianjin Goldin Metropolitan Polo Club, poses with his son, Lucas (left), and other La Quinta Santa Maria polo team members after winning the Campeonato Metropolitano 20 Goals tournament in Argentina in 2009.

Even though he retired nine years ago, Lalor is insistent he could still compete on the polo field. “Polo is a sport that allows people to play for a long time. Some kids start playing polo at the age of six and you can find 75-year-old polo players as well. I stopped playing professionally at 45, but I’m 54 and I feel like I could play for 20 more years,” he says.

Black relates a story of how Backley ruptured his Achilles tendon 14 weeks before the Olympics. Backley was told in no uncertain terms that his Olympic dream was over. “He was told to forget it. Steve couldn’t accept that. He built a team around himself – psychologists, physiotherapists and surgeons. He went on to win a silver medal off virtually no training, which is amazing,” Black says.

“As an athlete, you are focusing on one thing. But when you retire, you lose that clarity and end up doing

a lot of bits and pieces. You dilute yourself,” Black says. Nonetheless, clarity and focus are keys to athletic success, and Black reckons one must hold on to them after retirement. He points out that setting targets and achieving them is one of the bedrocks of athletic training – and a solid business.

#### LEARNING FROM FAILURE

Yet, however hard you train or work to make your business succeed, there will be pitfalls. One of the main lessons Black says the business world can learn from sports is the courage to fail. “Any elite sports person has mastered the fear of failure, especially if you are near the top. You are always pushing boundaries and doing things differently – you can’t become complacent.”

Dr Steven Rynne, from the School of Human Movement Studies at the University of Queensland, works with athletes and elite sportspeople in the areas of high performance coach learning and Indigenous sport. In a 2012 study, Rynne and colleagues from Switzerland and Great Britain concluded that adapting to life after elite sport was no easy task. However, their research also noted that business and sport share some virtues.

“While athletes train to become Olympians, they learn ways of valuing, understanding and doing. Values embedded in sporting practices can be productive beyond sport. Two such useful dispositions included organisation and persistence,” Rynne says. It isn’t always easy for professional athletes to make their mark in business, and Rynne points out that some traits learned in top competitive sport can be disadvantageous, such as submissiveness (perhaps to coaches) and an orientation to perfection.

**TEAM MANAGEMENT**

Collaboration is also a very strong trait with sportspeople. “Even though I was in a very individual sport, there was a team behind me and so teamwork is a natural thing for a sports person. No-one stands on the Olympic rostrum alone,” says Black. “In the workplace, surrounding yourself with talent can be as simple as working with co-workers to identify who is best at what and utilising a team ethic, a task that a surprising amount of businesses either don’t do or don’t do often enough.”

Hoggard agrees. “Understanding your own performance and the performances of others around you is key. As is putting a plan together to improve performances. You can do this every week as an athlete, but in business, most companies tend to have annual reviews, which means people can be doing the wrong thing or not realising their full potential for a year or so,” he says.

Lalor says polo has given him the skills to manage a big and varied business team. “Being a professional polo player helped me learn how to deal with [different kinds of people] and make arrangements and plan. The lifestyle of a polo professional [involves] travelling around the world and learning about different cultures and ways of doing things. Also, I believe that as the leader



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of a team, it is important to have a positive attitude, even if things are not going as expected,” he says.

Perhaps nowhere is the combination of teamwork, competitiveness and leadership most exemplified than in the world of competitive sailing. While most of the world’s best sailors often keep competing until well beyond the point of starting a business, there is certainly a reason why the sport attracts some of the world’s top business and political leaders – Larry Ellison, Ted Turner, Niklas Zennstrom and JFK, to name a few.

Turner, famous for starting CNN and the 24-hour news cycle, competed in the 1979 Fastnet Race, a legendary regatta off the south coast of England. That year, the regatta suffered the worst weather in its history, with typhoon-strength winds lashing a fleet of 300 yachts. Turner was captaining his yacht, *Tenacious*, and went on to win the race, even though 18 people were killed and several boats were lost in seas described

**05** Former England international cricketer Matthew Hoggard

**06** The finely honed crew of *Wild Oats*, which has repeatedly won the gruelling Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race.

COURTESY ROLEX/CARLO BORLENGHI

as “mountainous”. Turner famously said of the race that he was more afraid of losing than dying.

**LOSING TO WIN**

In an interview years later, Turner described how he began sailing at the age of 10: “In the first eight years that I raced sailboats, I never won. I was sailing at Savannah Yacht Club in Savannah, Georgia, and I never won a club championship. I was second almost all the time, but I never won once in eight years. And then in my ninth year of racing, I went to college and started racing there. And all the work that I had done, because those first eight years, I wasn’t really losing – I was learning how to win. From then on, from my first year in college, I won just about all the time.”

Alan Dickinson is chairman of Sport2Business, a recruiting company that specializes in placing elite athletes in business roles. “Probably the most

meaningful thing that we can all learn from elite athletes is not only that they crave learning and development in general terms, but that they pay inordinate attention to achieving as close to perfection as they can get in every aspect of their training and delivery, down to the smallest, most minute details, which they will identify and work and work and work on until they have their skill in that area completely honed, whereas most of the rest of us will accept mediocrity in our work across the board as long as it gets the job done,” he says.

A number of top-level rugby players have been placed into business by Sport2Business, which notes that athletes often start off – and excel – in sales and business development roles. It is the pressure of a leader board and clear goals that is often the kind of motivation they respond to most easily, Dickinson says. And that’s something that will surely make an impression in a boardroom. 🏆