

## **Becoming a Champion in Sport and Life: Lessons Learned**

(A presentation by **Leonard Zaichkowsky, Ph.D.** at the 19th Annual Conference on Counseling Athletes ("Winning in Sport and Life") at Springfield College, June 21-23, 2002. Dr. Zaichkowsky is **a specialist in the psychology of human development and performance** at Boston University, and consults with the U.S. Olympic Committee and the Boston Celtics.)

When we speak of excellence, we use words like experts, champions, genius, high level performance, or masters. What do we know about these types of people? We know that they are relatively rare. **What do we know about how they came to be champions, high-level performers, or masters?**

This topic has been studied by many. For **sources**, we can point to the Ottawa World Congress on Mental Training and Excellence, which looked at how excellence is generated in the performing arts, medicine, among astronauts and athletes. We can point to the work of Bloom in the development of teenagers, to Anders Ericsson at Florida State University, and to the work of Curt Tribble, M.D. and Doug Newburg at the University of Virginia School of Medicine where they train heart surgeons and their surgical teams. We can turn to studies done in medicine (Patel at McGill University School of Medicine in 1996), the work of Steven Covey in business, the work of Sloboda in music and the performing arts, and three studies done on coaches (Tharp and Gallamore in 1976, Salmela in 1996, and John McCarthy in 2002). In studying athletics, we could turn to the studies done by David Hemery, a British

Olympic hurdler at BU in 1986, by Plimpton in 1990, and by Zaichkowsky and Morris in 2001.

**How are champions made?** The first question that gets raised in studying excellence in athletics is whether its basis lies in genetics. The genetic theory suggests that your abilities in sport come as a result of your father and your mother... that you either have it or you don't. The research demonstrates that you don't. You aren't born with it, with the possible exception that the general body type that your DNA directed you to have is more conducive than not to the particular sport that you play. Even this is shaky, as you can find examples of athletic excellence in people with atypical body structure in virtually every sport. Mugsy Bogues excelled in the NBA. Gretzky's size did not deter him from becoming the greatest hockey scorer.

Studies have been conducted of the sons and daughters of elite athletes, and of multi-generational families involved in the same sport. The research has shown that **it is the sociology, the environment, and the nurture of the individual that has produced the result.** Top-level performance evolves from the **opportunities** that were presented to the developing child (Ken Griffey, Jr. was hanging around major league ballparks since he was 6), the **guidance** that he or she received, the **feedback** that was given, and the **support** that was present.

Hemery's study "The Pursuit of Sporting Excellence: A Study of Sport's Highest Achievers" looked at Billie Jean King, Bob Cousy, Wayne Gretzky, Arnold Palmer, Rod Laver, and others. This study found that the average age of **specialization** in one sport was the age of 16, though this number is decreasing. **Consistently hard**

**training** was found to be present in 97% of those studied. 66% of those studied were late developers. 78% were risk takers. 50% came from poor, working class families. Only 12% had parents with a background or prior experience in sports. Other characteristics that emerged: a stable home, parental discipline, and parental expectations for success.

Ericsson's work has demonstrated that **deliberate, attentive, high-quality practice** for a minimum of ten years or 10,000 hours is the entry price to be paid, that that practice is **highly structured for the purpose of improving performance**, that it is relevant to the task of performance, and that it is not inherently enjoyable. Many dispute some elements of these findings, especially the magical key-in-the-lock nature of the number of hours and years, but it is generally accepted that quality practice over a long period of time is essential.

Bloom's studies of talented teenagers across a variety of domains demonstrate the requirement for **a long intensive process of encouragement, nurturing education and training**. The differences in early experiences, preferences, opportunities, habits, training and practice are the real determinants of excellence.

Eisenberger's studies in 1988 confirm what parents and teachers have always said: industriousness, or **sustained hard work and high effort**, will get us there.

If we were to list the attributes common to champions, we would see a **physique** that was appropriate in size and form, **physiological components** of strength, muscular endurance, cardiovascular endurance, and

flexibility, the **motor skills** that were consistent, adaptable, and which demonstrated superior kinesthetic perception, high **perceptual skills** (the ability to pick up external and internal cues), and high **cognitive skills** including a superior ability to select relevant cues and detail in the environment, the ability to make fast and accurate decisions, the ability to plan actions in advance, and the use of sport-specific thinking.

In the background of champions, we would find personal attributes of a **work ethic intensity, early success, a willingness to change and adapt, and a high degree of emotional intelligence under pressure.** We would find coaches who first and foremost were teachers. We would find expert mentors who modeled correct process and technique. We would find a mix of people who provided increasing challenge and continuous support. We might also find training aimed at making both sides of the body (especially hands and feet) equally proficient and efficient, leading to purposeful movement. We would find a **coolness and presence of mind**, with **enhanced awareness of the environment and its dynamics**, the ability to use **clear judgment** at times of jeopardy, grace under pressure, and a **total focus**. We would find the use of **high-quality visualization and mental imagery** and other mental tools for performance enhancement, **a love of learning**, and **the willingness to take responsibility** for one's own performance.