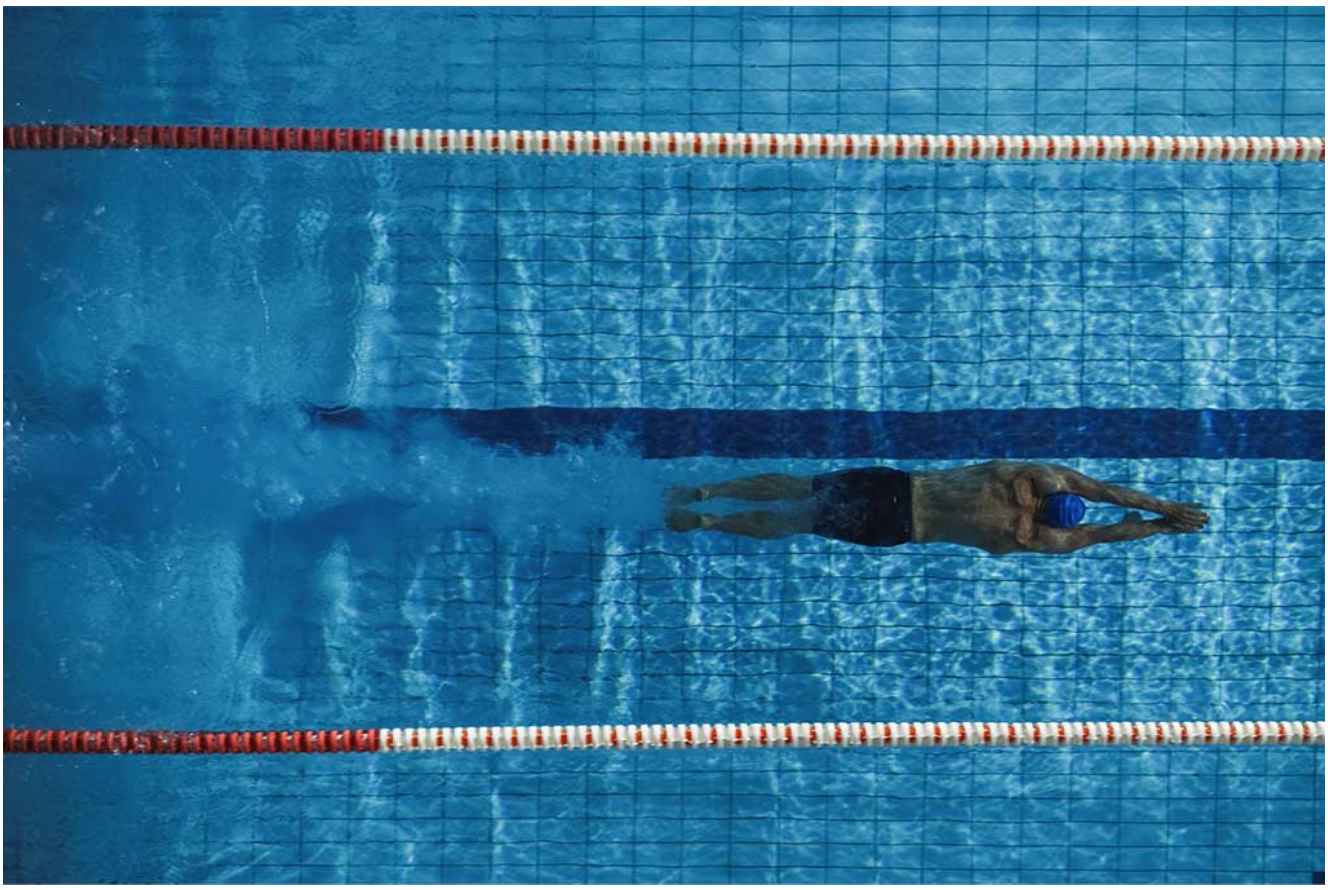
Swimming against the tide: here’s what it takes for world-class performance, in yourself and in your teams

Two-time Olympian Edward Sinclair knows winning is as much a battle waged in teams as in your own mind. Here he reveals what it takes to perform at world-class levels.



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World-class sporting events like the Olympics can be performed with such seeming ease that

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the spectator may sometimes forget the years of tireless dedication and long psychological battles that the athletes have waged to reach these pinnacles of their careers.

Two-time Olympian Edward Sinclair understands the complex path to become the best in the world.

This record-setting freestyle swimmer has won eight medals competing in World and European Championships, and he represented Britain in the Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004 Summer Olympic Games.

He has had his fair share of challenges along the way. After Team Britain placed 5th in the men's 4x200m freestyle relay in Sydney, Sinclair was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome but fought his way back to form part of the men's swimming squad in Athens.

After retiring from professional swimming in 2005, Sinclair decided to give back to his sport through coaching and inspiring the next generation of athletes, starting at the Millfield prep school.

He currently runs Maximum Performances. He was also part of the coaching team of the England National Talent Program, aimed at identifying high potentials and supporting their development to achieve future success at senior international level. He has coached swimmers all the way to the British National Team, and one swimmer he used to coach, James Disney-May, competed during the London 2012 Olympics.

To the uninitiated, athletic training looks deceptively one-dimensional: you just see people swimming lengths in a pool. But dive deeper and you see that achieving greatness — whether in sport or in business — depends on managing expectations, group dynamics, mental stamina and maintaining priorities.

Managing ambition without labels

Sinclair, who started training when he was 10, says it helps to start when you are young, so that you develop in the right way during each key stage of growth.

While it can be good to find you have a talent for something early on, being labeled prematurely can be limiting and keep you from achieving your full potential, he warns.

"You might do one good sprint event and everyone will say that you're a sprinter. But you might be a distance swimmer and not know it yet."

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Having too narrow a focus not only stops you from excelling in areas in which you might have a hidden talent, but it can also hold you back from the area you practice most. Variety will lead to a stronger overall performance, so it's important to keep the spectrum as wide open as possible during your early training years.

Labels can be put on you by other people — telling you to stick to what you know and never try to do anything different — or they can be self-imposed — the inner voice telling you that you don't have what it takes to ever do anything else. Even the most talented people need to resist their own mental barriers, especially those concerning success.

One of these false beliefs is that success happens overnight. "People love instant gratification. But you can't wake up one morning and suddenly be a champion. Success comes from putting a set of processes in place and staying with it over time. If someone underperforms, I say, 'Okay, let's try something different and try to do better work next time.' We'll attack it over a month or six months or six years. With some people it's a longer journey."

Natural ability is essential, but it counts for little if people quite simply don't have the drive to go along with it. "I've worked with some very physically talented people who didn't have the right mentality. They didn't want to train, they didn't want to put in the work, they didn't want to sacrifice. With them it takes a lot of perseverance and extreme patience."

However, there is little point in pushing someone — even if they are supremely talented — to achieve success on a national or international scale if they are only doing it for fun. For the sake of the team, each person needs to agree on where he or she is heading and set clear goals from the outset.

To show that they take their success seriously, Sinclair has the people he trains fill out and sign a goal sheet at the beginning of each term. Seeing the goals on paper and pledging to work toward the same objective together makes a big difference, he believes.

Regardless of whether they end up going to the Olympics or not, the main thing is that they are expressing a commitment to being the best they possibly can be; they are endeavoring "to reach their full potential."

Getting the group dynamics right

Although swimmers compete as individuals on the whole, they train and develop in groups.

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As such, getting the group dynamics right is vital. The group affects each person's motivation, self-perception and performance. Though crucial for success, having good team chemistry is one of the trickiest formulas to get right.

"You might have a couple of big personalities who will influence everyone else on the team. If you get the group dynamics wrong, and you have the wrong people working together, then the younger ones will get influenced by people they shouldn't."

You have to have the right balance of personalities. This applies to those managing the team as much as to the individual team members themselves. Putting two loud coaches together on the same team, for example, won't work either. Achieving the right balance comes from considering the individual abilities of each person and then playing to the strengths of each one.

One of the strengths that top performers grapple with is confidence. "Believe it or not, a lot of athletes struggle with confidence, even at the top," says Sinclair.

To help build up those with less confidence, you simply start by giving praise. "Tell them they're doing a good job. Obviously if they're doing something wrong, pick them up on it, but by all means tell them they're doing well." You can also pair them with more naturally confident performers to help bring them up.

Each athlete will be motivated by different things, so you have to tailor your coaching accordingly. This requires taking time to get to know each individual and finding out what makes each one tick.

"You might have athletes who love to be told they're great and that they are going to do an amazing job. Or you might have someone who needs to be told, 'That wasn't good enough. You could have done better. You know you're better than that.' When they stand up on the blocks, they're on their own, so you have to find things that work for them. It's fundamental you get to know them, and this takes time as there are many different personalities."

The team captain has a key role to play in this effort. And the right captain isn't necessarily the best athlete. Athletes can be quite selfish, given their extreme focus on their own individual performance. A great captain, on the other hand, is someone who is more interested in others.

"Traditionally, the best player or the best performer gets chosen to be captain, but one of the best captains that we ever picked was one of our weakest swimmers. He would go to all the

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competitions, and he gave emotional, passionate speeches at the end of the season that inspired everyone. He was just an amazing motivator." This is the kind of team leader and role model worth having in place.

Analyze yourself as well as others

As a coach or manager, you need to keep a close eye on how personality placement affects the team. But you also need to equip individuals to assess their own performance. You need to "challenge them to question themselves: could I have done this or that better?"

This applies just as much to the coach or manager, who is also part of the process. "I'm constantly testing them," says Sinclair, "but I'm also constantly testing myself. I walk away from every training session asking myself if I could have done it better and if I approached things in the right way. It's important to analyze other people — but it's just as important to analyze your own relationship with them."

He adds, "If you're the head, and you've got nowhere else to go, and no one else is analyzing you in terms of your performance, then it is crucial for you to develop this self-awareness and find ways to evaluate your own performance."

Diving in after defeat

In the Sydney Olympics, in the men's 4×200m freestyle relay event, the Australians took the gold with a record time of 7:07.05 while the U.S., Dutch, Italian and British teams all touched at the same next-best time of 7 minutes and 12 seconds. The final tally came down to fractions of a second, with the Americans getting the silver (7:12.64) and the bronze going to the Netherlands (7:12.70) with a slim margin between them and the Italians (7:12.91) and Team Britain (7:12.98). Think about it: in a third of the time it takes for you to say "one second" you've missed out on a medal.

"After a disappointment like that, it's easy to go into a slump and feel like you want to quit. I see this happening quite a lot with young people: They build something up and when they don't get it, they just quit and leave it all behind, which is a real shame."

Instead of giving up after a setback, Sinclair urges that you take stock of the positives and consider other sets of goals. Rather than focusing on the missed medal, he made a list of what had been achieved in that race: going to the Olympics at the age of 19; swimming an

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Olympic final; breaking the British record.

“It’s probably taught me a lot more, missing that medal,” he says, speculating that winning might have made him complacent or a bit lazy. Sometimes one of the biggest barriers to success can be feeling satisfied to be among the best and simply stop there. The visceral stab of disappointment that comes from failure can be a better stimulus for pushing you forward.

Sinclair believes “it’s important in life to always be chasing something because it keeps you strong.” If you’re satisfied with mediocrity, you won’t just stay where you are, you’ll go backward. You need to take the disappointment and use it to help you win the next race.

“I’ve raced against some of the greatest people in history — Ian Thorpe and Pieter van den Hoogenband. And every time I stood on the blocks I believed I could beat them. People might have thought I was arrogant or deluded. But I truly believed that I could go on and beat those guys.”

How often do you play at second best simply because you don’t believe you’re good enough? And might this defeatist attitude be limiting your performance and keeping you from ever competing at the level of the big leagues?

Staying afloat

All heroic epics need an element of toil and struggle — to a point. For your own sense of health and wellbeing, you need to keep things balanced and in perspective, otherwise you risk getting burned out. “You have to have a life and make time to go out and have fun,” admits Sinclair.

As important as it is to combine your dedication to your profession with a life outside, you have to learn to do it on your own terms, without compromising your devotion. For example, if you’re going out with people who don’t share your same concerns, you have to be a bit more self-disciplined.

“When I was going out with friends who weren’t athletes, I would still make sure to eat well and look after myself as I knew my performance was at stake. I once went to a party, had a ball, but then changed into my trainers (sneakers) and went for a run afterwards.”

Working hard doesn’t mean you have to rule out a social life; you just need to adapt it to your

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own agenda. “I love getting up early on Christmas morning and going training. It’s training when other people aren’t training. Those sorts of things keep you one step ahead.”

Tech no substitute for the basics

Technology has revolutionized the world of competitive sport as much as any other field. Underwater camera technology, for example, has considerably increased the reach of coaches. As most of the stroke techniques take place underwater, the analysis is now able to be much more all-encompassing and precise.

Yet while technology has upped the possibilities for analysis, it’s important not to exaggerate what it can do for you. “I love technology,” says Sinclair, “but you can’t depend on it. A bit of equipment comes out and you think you have to go out and buy it. But if you haven’t got the basics right, no amount of technology will help you.”

Sinclair likes to keep it simple, because being the best, he argues, is ultimately about being the best at the basics. “Michael Phelps does the simple things in swimming better than everyone else and that’s why he’s the best. It’s not because he has the best equipment; it’s because he’s amazing at the simple things like starts, turns and dolphin kicks. He has just perfected the essential things.”

“Throughout my career, I pushed myself to the absolute limit. Until you go to that limit, you’re not going to understand things and be able to reach your potential.”

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“I don’t do negativity”

How do you ignore the naysayers and come back fighting when the chips are down?

In 2001, having won his first national title and competed at the Sydney Olympics, Edward Sinclair (pictured) was given the potentially career-ending diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome.

Training for at least 20 hours a week, it’s normal to be constantly on the verge of getting ill. When his performance times started to drop, his coach pushed him to train harder. But there was a lingering sore throat and a tiredness he just couldn’t shake off. After seeing some medical specialists, the penny dropped.

“It was a real setback. As a kid, I had always dreamed of winning an Olympic gold. It was everything to me. After Sydney, I really thought I had a chance of finally getting a medal in the next Olympics. I felt capable of doing that.”

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He had to stop swimming altogether. To fill the sudden void in his life, he surrounded himself with friends and family. After six months, he attempted to start training again but it was no good. Another six months went by.

One day he decided to call the trainer who had coached him through the first Olympics. “He knew me well and we connected. He knew what worked and said we could plan it.” It was 2003 and they had 12 months to get in shape for the Athens 2004 Olympics.

His training was limited to 15 minutes a day to start with — much less than the typical five hours of his competitors. If that wasn’t disheartening enough, he found himself being overtaken by 13-year-olds in the pool. And then there was the tide of public perception to deal with.

“After I pulled out of the Commonwealth Games, people said I was finished. People said I was never going to make it. There were a lot of people doubting me.”

But he was determined to prove them wrong, even though the odds were stacked against him. Mentally he was desperate to train, but physically he couldn’t. While this mental energy meant he pushed himself too far at times, it was what got him to Athens.

Where did he pull this self-belief from? How did he manage to ignore all the gloom, overcome the obstacles and represent Britain once again?

“I don’t do negativity,” he says. “I don’t believe in it. I might not have had a good swim that day, but I look at what did go well: I had a good start or my turns were good. That is what has helped me most in my career. I always try to see the positive in every situation.”

Article written by Lydia Smears, a former assistant editor of IESE Insight. This article was originally published in IESE Insight magazine (Issue 21, Q2 2014).

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