Finding your inner athlete



You may never hit a tennis ball like Serena Williams or dominate a basketball court like LeBron James but that shouldn't stop you from being the best athlete you can be regardless of your age or ability.

World class athletes show us that more than talent and training are required to reach the top. They possess certain attitudes and behaviours that are critical to achieving any goal in life. These include:

Constantly striving to improve performance
Focusing on higher goals and the next challenge
Learning and bouncing back from failure

- Positivity and confidence in their abilities
- Focus and motivation
- Managing stress and anxiety effectively
- Working well with others

Today's athletes not only prepare their bodies to win – they prepare their minds.

Seeing is believing

For swimmer Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all time with 28 medals, mental preparation is as important as physical training. He acknowledged that visualization or guided imagery played a big role in his success. Leading up to a competition, he would mentally rehearse each race twice a day - before he slept and when he woke up. He visualized diving into the pool, each stroke and kick, the rhythm of the race, the water on his face, his breath, his every turn and the sprint to the finish. "It's about seeing what I want to see, seeing what I don't want to see, seeing what I possibly could see," he has said. "I'm trying to picture it all, everything I possibly can, so that I'm ready for anything that happens."

His routine before any race never varied. He stood behind his starting block bouncing on his toes. When his name was announced, he stepped onto the block and stepped down again then swung his arms three times, just as he'd done thousands of times in his mind. He then stepped back onto the block, got into his stance and when the gun sounded, his body knew exactly how the race would go.

Seeing success

Visualization is about creating success in the mind. Here are some tips to help you master the technique:

- **Find a comfortable place** where you won't be interrupted. Relax your body and take several long, slow breaths.
- **Be detailed**. Visualize your breath, the weight of your racket or bat in your hand, the squeak of rubber on the wood floor, the adrenaline coursing through your blood and the joy of winning the match or achieving a personal best.
- **Have a specific goal**. Is it winning a race or match? Beating your best time? Overcoming a challenge? Whatever it is, make sure it's clear.
- **Imagine calmly dealing with problems**. Things do go wrong – your shoe lace breaks, it rains on race day or your goggles fill with water (this happened to Michael Phelps at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, effectively blinding him – but he had visualized every possible issue, so he stayed calm, counted his strokes and won gold!).

Remember, the more you do this, the better you'll get at it - and the better your performance will be.

Going for gold

Great athletes use many other tools to help them reach their goals. Try some of the following to help train your inner athlete:

- **Set a goal and make a plan.** Establish a realistic and measurable goal then design a workout schedule that will help you reach it. Track your progress and modify your plan as needed.
- **Mix it up.** When you do the same thing over and over, you may improve but you may also get bored, burned out or injured. Find different physical activities such as riding a bike, skiing or horseback riding. Olympic athletes modify their workouts every few weeks and often choose sports very different from the one in which they compete during the off seasons.
- **Create a support system**. You may not have coaches, trainers, psychologists, physical therapists and personal assistants, but you can still have a team behind you. Involve your family and friends in your activities. If they don't want to join you, they can encourage you.
- **Pay attention to your health.** Any training regime includes a healthy lifestyle – a good diet, plenty of sleep, and lots of water.

Be sure to check with your family doctor before beginning any exercise program. For more information on improving your performance in all aspects of your life, contact your Employee Assistance Program.