



## A DIFFERENT BALL GAME

When it comes to performance, top athletes are ahead of the field, and it's no surprise that businesses are turning to sports coaching. But what can it really teach the corporate world?

By Karen Higginbottom

Illustration Daniel Mackie

**T**he sports and business worlds have much in common: the drive to succeed, the ability to perform under pressure and a thin line between success and failure.

For the past 20 years, sports coaching psychology has been applied to business coaching. And, since the 1990s, a host of sports coaching firms has sprung up in the UK. Keith Hatter is chief executive of one such company, K2. He has spent 20 years in the corporate world and believes there is a valid association between sports and business coaching, with the issue of performance providing the vital link.

"If you want to go to an arena where human performance is understood and there has been 30 years of research, there is only one place to go and that's sports," he argues.

A turning point for the development of sports coaching psychology was the publication of Tim Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis* in 1974. Gallwey, a professional player and instructor, claimed the "real game of tennis" was played inside the mind, which needed to overcome mental obstacles, reduce anxiety and improve concentration to enhance performance.

Hatter believes sports coaching has much to teach the corporate world. "Technical skills are taught in the corporate arena but people aren't taught how to think in order to perform well. That is where the application of sports coaching psychology comes in."

Business has yet to grasp what "performance" means, he says. "If we speak to businesses about human performance issues, they talk about return on investment and sales and market growth. But when we ask: 'What is this thing called human performance?' we get silence. The sports arena understands there is a number of component parts to human performance to perform at the required level. These are mental, physical, technical and tactical."

Although both sports and business coaching have performance in common, some industry experts believe sports principles cannot be directly applied to the business world. Jessica Jarvis, CIPD adviser, learning, training and development, urges caution: "Things could go wrong if it was a simple transfer of sports coaching, since an employer is providing very different coaching from a professional

### Case study: Toshiba

Andy Bass, general manager for Toshiba's computer division, contacted K2 in January to use its Athlete at Work programme for its top 13 senior managers. "I had not come across the use of performance training before in a business environment," he says. "We work in a fast-changing, high-performance environment and are up against massive global competitors. We needed to have our people think of themselves as core performers or we would start to lose our advantage."

The programme comprised of a two-day session where the concepts of elite performance, motivation, key tools and techniques were discussed alongside the components of physical performance. "The purpose of the session was to raise questions in people's minds such as: 'What do I understand by performance?'" says Keith Hatter, K2 chief executive.

The two days were followed by 10 individual coaching sessions – face-to-face and over the phone – over 10 months. A performance plan was drawn up for each participant, with input given by the line manager.

This plan provided the framework for the coaching. At the same time, a number of performance areas were identified and measured. These were measured again at the end of the process to gauge progress, explains Hatter.

The participants showed a 30 per cent improvement in the level of peak performance in key areas, an average 35 per cent increase in vitality, and a 20 per cent improvement in mental skills.

Bass says the coaching programme has been a life-changing experience for five of the 13 participants. "We wanted a more permanent change in their thinking and the way they approached their jobs," he says.

One of the participants, who holds down a stressful job managing Toshiba's supply chain for the computer division, gave up smoking and learnt to swim after the coaching programme, explains Bass. Participants also adopted a greater sense of personal responsibility in the part they played in their work environment.

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athlete working in a team." For example, Jarvis points out that in employer-provided coaching more stakeholders tend to be involved, not only the coach and the coachee. "Other interested parties include the line manager and HR, which represent the organisation's interests," she explains.

Frank Dick, former Great Britain athletic coach, doesn't agree. He believes the same principles apply whether you are developing a business or an athlete. "Coaching as a profession has got so much of a generic aspect," he says. "There is a strong case for using coaching in whatever field you are in."

But Jarvis argues that there is a potential pitfall facing coaches using sports psychology if they have inadequate business experience. "The advice they offer may not be suitable. There are lots of constraints in the business world and you can't just try out any system. You need to give advice that fits in with the needs of the business." She believes coaching firms with former athletes as coaches may face obstacles when employers are looking for executive coaches with extensive business knowledge. "If they don't have the qualifications or industry knowledge, they may not fit the bill," she says.

Gladeana McMahon, vice-president of the Association for Coaching and head of coaching at outplacement and coaching provider Fairplace, points out that using sports coaching psychology is only one strand of business coaching, and that it may not necessarily be applicable for all types of business coaching. "For example, you could use it for team coaching but it may not be suitable if the coaching is addressing personal issues."

McMahon also thinks a lot of sports coaching psychology is focused predominantly on the individual rather than the needs of the organisation. "Athletes are very focused on how to win, but theirs are often individual sports," she says.

"Working in a team is a different ball game and a corporate company is very much wedded to organisational needs."

It is far more common to have sports coaching psychology transferred to business coaching, but can the sporting arena learn anything from the business world? Dick believes so. "In learning, you are interdependent – that is a lesson. You are all player-coaches, and that is a hugely significant lesson from business. But when I am business coaching, everyone is being coached. One moment you are out there learning from a colleague, the next moment along I come," says Dick. "It doesn't happen often in sport as we are jealously protective of what we know and we pass it on to the athlete, not the coach."

Graham Jones, co-founder of Lane4, which uses former Olympic athletes as coaches, believes lessons can be learnt on both sides. "When I started working in the business world I came to understand the wider issues that individuals in organisations face, such as politics and culture," he says. "Now when I work in the sporting world I am better equipped to work at an organisational level, helping coaches and team managers to develop an environment in which athletes can thrive. For example, I can remember during the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta when the buses carrying athletes got lost on the way to the stadium. Athletes were more worried about their environment than their performance and I learnt to understand the constraints and frustrations they had to put up with."

Hatter of K2 agrees that many business lessons can be applied to sports coaching. "In sports, systems and processes tend to be less valued and structured," he says. "In the corporate world, there will be ways of doing things that have been developed over time and are now seen as best practice, whether that be in HR or IT."

But is there much exchange of information between the two arenas? Hatter believes more needs to be done to encourage this. "Coaches who understand both worlds are few and far between. There is a lot to be learnt from a combination of the two," he says. ■

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