

# Developing Resilience

– Lessons Learned from Olympic Champions

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Winning an Olympic gold medal is universally recognized as the pinnacle of sporting achievement and arguably the most demanding challenge an athlete can pursue. In a fascinating book<sup>1</sup> about the personal qualities of Olympic champions, Michael Johnson explores the sporting journeys of over a dozen Olympic legends who between them have won 50 gold medals during the past four decades. A common theme throughout the book is the ability of champions to overcome various obstacles and challenges en route to their medal winning performance. Two stories are particularly noteworthy: Ian Thorpe broke his ankle just ten months before the

2000 Sydney Games but he found ways to use his strengths in order to enhance his training, and the International Olympic Committee removed Chris Hoy's event from the Olympic programme after the 2004 Athens Games but he subsequently took up new cycling events to continue his Olympic ambition. Why is it that such sport performers are able to withstand the pressures associated with the Olympics and attain peak performances whereas others succumb to the demands and under-perform?

We aimed to address this question in a recent study<sup>2</sup> by interviewing twelve Olympic champions from a range of sports regarding their experiences of withstanding pressure during their

sporting careers. We found that the world's best athletes shared a unique mental resilience characterised by a number of key psychological attributes (relating to a positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support) that provides support to the development of Lane4's personal resilience framework (see sidebar). This article draws on the findings of our study, using quotes from the gold medallists, to show how individuals can enhance their own personal resilience for sustained high performance.

## DEVELOP A POSITIVE PERSONALITY

Olympic gold medallists possessed numerous positive personality

<sup>1</sup> Johnson, M. (2011). *Gold Rush: What Makes an Olympic Champion?* London, UK: HarperSport.

<sup>2</sup> Fletcher, D., & Sarkar, M. (2012). A grounded theory of psychological resilience in Olympic champions. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 13, 669-678.

characteristics, including openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, optimism, competitiveness, and proactivity. The following quote illustrates how one champion evaluated missing out on selection for a major international competition in a positive manner, due to his optimistic and proactive nature:

“There were four of us challenging for these final two places... and I got told I was on the reserve list. And at the time it was devastating but it’s one of those things; if you don’t take a ticket in the raffle, you’re never going to win a prize. So you have to take the ticket... that’s part of life and it just makes you think ‘well, what can I do differently to make sure I do get success?’”

### OPTIMISE MOTIVATION

Olympic gold medallists had multiple internal (e.g., achieving personally referenced goals) and external (e.g., proving their worth to others) motives for competing at the highest level. Particularly important in the context of developing resilience, the world’s best athletes recognised that they actively chose to engage with challenging situations, such as balancing work and sport, as the following quote highlights:

“We all worked. But in terms of the build up to the Olympics, we didn’t bat an eyelid in doing it... it was our choice to do it. I don’t like the word sacrifice... Sacrifice to me is about last resort and there’s no alternative – that’s rubbish. We made a choice

to do that and I think that choice in what we did we highly valued and I think that inspired us, motivated us to perform on the pitch and as a group.”

### STRENGTHEN CONFIDENCE

Confidence was deemed to be a particularly important factor for the resilience of Olympic champions. Various sources of confidence were relevant to the world’s best athletes, including preparation, experience, self-awareness, visualisation, coaching, and teammates. The following quote illustrates how confidence originating from the team positively affected a gold medallist’s evaluation of pressure:

“We were playing against (country) in our last game... and I looked at my opposite number and I thought ‘I’m going to give you a hard time today kid’... Now if I had that internal thought 18 months ago, I would have thought I was being schizophrenic or something, because if you’re going to lose to anybody it’s (country), but I just felt I had such confidence in... my team’s ability.”

### MAINTAIN FOCUS

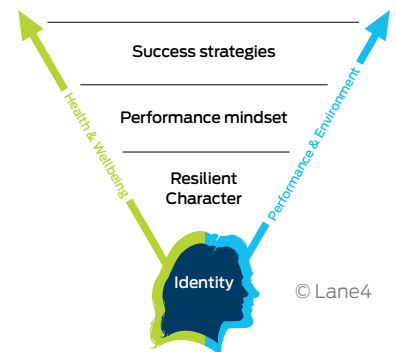
The ability to focus was an important aspect of resilience for the world’s best athletes. Specifically, they were able to focus on themselves, not be distracted by others, focus on the process rather than the outcomes of events, and were able to switch their sport focus on and off to suit the demands they faced. One Olympic champion recalled how his single-minded focus on

## LANE4’S PERSONAL RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK

Lane4’s Personal Resilience framework is underpinned by performance psychology research in sport and business. The framework shows that personal resilience is influenced by a broad range of factors including your Health & Wellbeing, and the Performance Environment around you

The individual characteristics of personal resilience can be grouped into: Success Strategies, Performance Mindset, and Resilient Character.

### Lane4’s Personal Resilience Framework



**Success strategies** can be viewed as the ‘pilot of the plane’. Controlled by the rational, conscious, logical brain, these conscious strategies can be taught and applied to manage emotions and attention, and make the right decisions when it counts.

**Performance mindset** reflects the more intuitive brain; the ‘autopilot’. Dedication, tendency to thrive on challenge, and the ability to bounce back stronger following adversity all contribute towards a performance mindset.

A **resilient character** reflects each individual’s secure base. The stronger your self-belief and drive to succeed, the more solid your foundation from which you can stretch yourself. Drive and self-belief are mutually reinforcing – the stronger your belief in your abilities, the more driven you feel to succeed. Likewise, insatiable drive to succeed tends to breed success, subsequently reinforcing your self-belief.

**Personal Identity** sits at the base of the model, since your personality, core beliefs and values provide the foundation for your personal resilience, which affects your approach in all of the other areas.

himself and the team resulted in him being almost unaware of the pressures around him:

“It’s funny, in a way I was kind of oblivious to pressures because I think in some ways you just go so into yourself... well, it’s a hugely selfish thing isn’t it? You’re concentrating on yourself and this group of five people and you’re living in each other’s pockets.”

### RECOGNISE THE AVAILABILITY OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Olympic champions perceived that high quality social support was available to them, including support from family, coaches, teammates, and support staff. According to one gold medallist, his parents helped to protect him from the pressures of elite sport by giving him the opportunity to air his grievances:

“I’ve got injured, I’ve not got selected, all those sort of things where it’s not gone right... But... they (one’s parents) talk it through with you. My mum especially would talk it through and say ‘What are you going to do about this?’ They didn’t judge me and say, ‘You’re doing this wrong’ or ‘you’re doing that right’, they just provided me with the support that you need and a sounding board to express myself.”

### FINAL THOUGHTS

According to the Olympic champions, an integral aspect of their resilience was their ability to utilise and optimise a ‘specific mix’ of characteristics to withstand the pressures they encountered. Based on the study’s findings, we provide some top tips on how to

develop resilience for sustained high performance. In view of the close link between performance excellence in sport and business,<sup>3</sup> organisations should seek to develop the aforementioned psychological factors (i.e., positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support) that employees can use to build their own personal resilience. Resilience has a critical role to play in achieving success, as illustrated in the following extract from the Harvard Business Review:

“More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person’s level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails. That’s true in the cancer ward, it’s true in the Olympics and it’s true in the boardroom.”<sup>4</sup>

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#### TOP TIPS ON DEVELOPING RESILIENCE FOR SUSTAINED HIGH PERFORMANCE

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1. View setbacks as an opportunity for mastery and growth. During a commencement address at Stanford University in 2005, Steve Jobs credited his early dismissal from Apple in 1985 as the key to his subsequent achievements:

“Getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was

replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.”

2. Be proactive in your personal development. For example, you could update your skills, expand your core competencies, and engage in career planning
3. Be sensitive to different types of motivation (e.g., internal and external) and consider the decisions you make as active choices rather than sacrifices
4. Build your confidence from multiple sources (e.g., performance accomplishments, experience, and colleagues) rather than focusing on one particular source
5. Focus on what you can control, on processes, the present, positives, and staying composed
6. Take specific steps to obtain the support that you need. Possible options may include seeking suitable mentors, building cohesive teams, and hiring competent staff