
Competing Against The World: What Business Can Learn From Sport

Robert M. Nideffer, Ph.D., and Ronald S. Rembisz, Ph.D.

Thanks to the Olympics, elite level athletes in the U.S. know what it's like to compete against the rest of the world. For a long time, the United States dominated competition in many Olympic sports. Then, in the 1970's the U.S. got a rude awakening.

Eastern European countries discovered the propaganda value associated with winning athletes and teams. They began allocating a disproportionate share of their resources to the identification and development of world class talent. Suddenly, the U.S. was being beaten by athletes from Cuba, Russia, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and found itself "back in the pack", scrambling to regain the lead.

Is business any different than sport? Recent technological advances have changed communication and the flow of information. Businesses are now finding themselves involved in global competition. The market place has expanded and with it, the demand that each individual in the organization perform up to his or her full potential. To understand these challenges, consider the pressure on an athlete who hopes to compete in the 100 meters.



In the 1988 U.S. Olympic Trials, seven of eight male sprinters competing for two slots on the team, ran the 100 meters in under 10 seconds, and seven of the eight female sprinters ran the 100 in less than 11 seconds. All fourteen of those sprinters had the physical, technical, and tactical skills needed not only to make the team, but to win a Gold Medal. However, only four of the fourteen made the team, and only two finally won Gold Medals.

As U.S. team members lined up for the final in Seoul, the stiff competition was only one of the elements which contributed to the pressure they were under, and with which they had to cope. Each athlete had spent four years of his or her life preparing for a race that would last about 10 seconds. Each athlete's performance would be played out in front of millions of people. Each athlete carried the hopes and expectations of coach, family, friends, teammates, and even country to the starting line. Finally, each athlete knew only too well the tremendous emotional and economic difference between first and second place.

Look at Business Today

Advances in computers and communication are having a dramatic effect on business. The ease with which we can gain access to critical information is improving every day. Companies that once dominated a particular market are now finding themselves having to fight an increasing number of competitors just to hang on to their market share. Large corporations are finding their technological and economic superiorities

disappearing and they've become vulnerable to smaller companies, companies who, because of their size, are able to move more quickly to take advantage of changes in technology and changing conditions in the market place.

Like the sprinter who spends four years preparing for a ten second race, businesses have to invest more and more in the way of time and resources to be ready for a window of opportunity that can be extremely brief. General Motors may give one of its suppliers fifteen minutes with a decision maker, to sell them on a product the supplier has spent millions of real dollars and countless hours developing.

Athletes have always had their performance open to scrutiny, executives and managers have not. This is changing because performance cycles in business are shortening. As the competition increases, the time it takes to move from a concept to a finished product must decrease. Software companies are under incredible pressure from tight time lines to get high quality products on the shelves. Ford is moving from a 4 year developmental cycle to two, and a great many engineers, designers, and managers aren't coping effectively with the increasing pressure. As time lines shorten, the performance of each individual and the team, becomes more visible. Like the athlete, managers and executives are finding themselves performing before a highly critical audience.

Pressure is increasing because critical decisions must be made before all of the information is available. For the United States, there was only a 15% overlap between the athletes who competed at the World Championships in Helsinki in 1983, and those who competed in the Olympic Games twelve months later. As a result, Olympic coaches didn't know which athletes they would be working with, and the athletes didn't know who would be in the lane next to them until the last minute. Information, which if available earlier, would have made preparation much easier. In a similar way, today's executives and managers must make decisions which have profound effects on their companies productivity and future. They must make educated guesses about increasingly complex and unpredictable issues. Which operating system, or software package should we use? Should we try to compete in Europe? What new products or services should we introduce? Etc.

The USOC Sports Medicine Committee

In the early 1980's the USOC Sports Medicine Committee recognized that success in the Olympics would require a team effort. So, in 82 they funded an elite athlete development project which brought together experts in the sport sciences (exercise physiology, psychology, bio-mechanics, and nutrition) and made their services available to athletes likely to make the team. That program began having a positive effect in 1984, and has made a tremendous difference in the over all competitiveness of U.S. Teams and athletes. When you see athletes approach the starting line in Atlanta, you can be assured they've had the best preparation possible.

What have we learned from the elite athlete development project?

First, we've learned there's no substitute for identifying talent, and for putting the right people in the right situations. Second, we've learned that athletes can no longer make up for a lack of tactical or technical knowledge with drive and determination. To be competitive at a world class level, they must have both. Third, and most important, when everyone's motivated, and there are no clear technical, or tactical advantages, psychological factors, like the ability to control concentration and emotional arousal, will determine the winner.

It's psychological skills which allow winners to shut out negative thoughts, distractions, and doubts, and to control their emotions. It's these skills which allow them to make critical decisions under pressure. It's these skills that insure they will react appropriately, at the right time. A sprinter who's thinking about the competition when the gun goes off, has lost the race. A sprinter who's let other athletes and/or officials irritate him and, as a result, tightens up a little too much, becoming over aggressive, has also lost the race.

In business as in sport, there's no substitute for putting the right people in the right jobs at the right time. But this isn't easy. Rapid growth in promising companies has resulted in individuals being promoted into positions they either aren't suited for, and/or lack the training and experience required, to be successful. To do a better job of fitting people into slots in the organization, businesses must do a better job of identifying and assessing the unique concentration and interpersonal skills required by each position.

In business as in sport technical and tactical knowledge isn't enough. Businesses need a highly dedicated and motivated work force. That only happens when individuals are working together toward a common goal. As organizations grow in size and complexity, team building becomes increasingly important. Without it, individuals, departments, and divisions lose sight of over all goals and objectives. When this happens the organization becomes it's own worst enemy, competing against itself rather than the competition.

Finally, in business as in sport, when competition and pressure intensify, psychological factors, like the ability to concentrate on the right things, to control emotions, and confront critical issues in a timely and interpersonally effective way will determine success. Just as athletes have benefited from specific training providing them with greater control, there is an increasing need for managers and executives to get similar, but business focused training. The goal being to become aware and in control of those factors that will lead to desired results and exceptional performance.

Dr. Nideffer was a participant on the USOC elite athlete development team, and the psychologist for the 1984 and 1988 U.S. Olympic Track and Field teams. He is a consultant to corporations, sports organizations, and the founder of Enhanced Performance Systems. Dr. Rembisz has extensive experience in helping organizations deal with the complexities of a global economy and international management. Together, they offer 3-4 day training programs for senior executives, giving them the tools to compete more effectively in the business arena or board room, as well as on the golf course or tennis court.
