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Their winning ways

In the third of an occasional series, **Allan Snyder** considers the essence of championship

Brooks Johnson, the great Olympic Coach at Stanford University, once said: "There is no way you can do the things necessary to be [an Olympic champion] and not be clinically neurotic and, in some instances, clinically psychotic ... [champions] are very abnormal people."

Is there really any difference between the so-called neurosis of the athlete from that of the artist, the scientist or for that matter any individual who commits themselves to realising a dream?

What elusive spirit sustains us through the agonising process necessary to win, necessary to transcend boundaries? Answer this question and we will have unlocked one of the mysteries of the mind. We will have discovered the element in common with all great achievers and have captured a crucial ingredient of championship.

Compelling research reveals that our mental attitude - our mindset - dictates our performance. Two athletes may enter the race with similar bodies, even similar training, but their mindsets will be different.

After barely qualifying for the 1500 metre event and being given up for lost by many experts, Kieran Perkins went on to a spectacular golden win for Australia in the Atlanta Olympics.

Isn't this an example of the role of the mindset in winning? And especially for winning in the face of adversity, in the face of disbelievers, winning by coming from behind.

And, sports doesn't have a monopoly on those who come from behind to win. Just think of the many writers, like Faulkner, who persevered through years of rejections before they achieved acclaim recognition. Or the legions of scientists whose groundbreaking research was ignored by the establishment, yet they continued on to eventually change the prevailing paradigm. And there is Nelson Mandela, who emerged as the supreme champion of the hu-

man spirit after more than two decades of imprisonment.

So what is it that differentiates the champions from the rest of the pack? Studies show that the great achievers often create dreams or visions of exactly what they want to do and how they are actually going to do it. Of course, the role of dreams and mental imagery is legendary for those in the creative arts and sciences.

But if it works in the arts and sciences, could mental imagery be of value for enhancing an athlete's performance? Could just thinking about a race make athletes better?

Yes! In one recent study, 99% of Canadian Olympians reported that they used mental imagery as a preparation strategy - they actually visualised their winning performance, step by step.

And, to add to the mystery, new research from Manchester University shows that physical strength can be enhanced by just thinking about an exercise.

What does all this tell us? Great achievers have a vision that they will succeed and sometimes they even see the steps leading to their success. So, in my opinion, what makes a champion, and I mean a champion in the broadest sense, is a champion mindset.

The world is viewed in its totality through this mindset. In other words, if you have done something great in one field, you are far more able to do it in another. The champion mindset is the transferable commodity. There are so many examples but I am reminded of Roger Bannister who, after breaking the 4 minute mile, became a neurologist of great acclaim.

It is our mindsets which ultimately limit our expectations of ourselves and which circumscribe our boundaries. It is our mindsets which determine whether or not we have the courage to challenge others and to expand our horizons.

The so-called neurosis of the athlete to which I alluded earlier is no pathology. Rather, it is the athlete's inevitable single-minded dedication to a passion. A dedication that is fuelled and sustained by their mindset.

Championship is a fascinating and complex phenomenon of which mindset is a crucial component. But what else is there? How, for example is championship shaped by our genetic make up, our gender, our culture, our education, and even our emotional interactions? We are compelled to find out. The answers could powerfully influence all of our lives. And what better platform for this exploration than the Olympics themselves?

The Olympic Games are the quintessential venue for the exploration of human achievement, the ideal platform for encouraging the cross fertilisation of ideas about performance from every persuasion. Isn't it time for the Olympic movement to embrace a larger vision of itself: one more passionate about performance in its broadest sense?

Australia is the ideal country to propose a new dimension for the Olympic Movement. After all, we are the great sporting nation, and we are a great nation of innovators.



The will to win? Above: Australian swimmer Kieran Perkins, who came up from behind to win an Olympic gold medal in Atlanta
Left: former South African president, Nelson Mandela, who endured more than two decades in prison before emerging to lead his country.
Below: Britain's Roger Bannister on his way to becoming the first person to run a mile in less than four minutes, in 1954 - he later became an acclaimed neurologist.

So why not pilot a permanent intellectual component of the Olympic Games?

Imagine if we could have the supreme champion of the human spirit, Nelson Mandela himself, lead a cast of celebrity champions to do just this. Imagine a global gathering of Nobel Prize winners, Olympic gold medallists, corporate giants, academy award winners, acclaimed artists, musicians and writers working together to unravel the universals of championship.

This is no dream. It is a reality. What Makes a Champion?, an extraordinary event, will be opened by Nelson Mandela just ten days before the 2000 Olympic Games at the Great Hall of the University of Sydney on 3 September.

Professor Snyder is Director of the Centre for the Mind, a joint venture of the Australian National University and the University of Sydney.. www.centreforthemind.com.

What Makes a Champion? is the brainchild of the Centre for the Mind. The Prime Minister is patron. The AMP, the Australian Olympic Committee, and Ernst and Young are intellectual partners.