

ON THE BALL: Former Athletes in the Workplace

by Christina Ngo and Alyssa Kiel



Athletes who give up their sport for a business career take the competitive edge with them. For former athletes, it's never just a job. It is a challenge and an opportunity to get better every day.

WHEN THE LIGHT GOES OUT

There is nothing like it: The glorious combination of physical pain, exhaustion, adrenaline, pure joy, and relief when you score that winning goal, cross the finish line first, or break a record. Sweating profusely, you can barely stand, but you suddenly get a second wind to jump, cheer, and shout while you look around for your teammates, family, and friends to share your moment with. In that one moment, all the months of grueling training and sacrifice are worth it. Nothing else matters.

Any former or current athlete has experienced this feeling at some point in their lives. For some, it might have happened last in Little League T-ball. For others, like the millions of former college

athletes now walking the halls of companies around the world, this is something we remember vividly in our dreams.

Even though we have hung up our jerseys and gym bags and donned suits and heels, we carry with us many important lessons from our past as athletes in the world of business.

DEALING WITH FAILURE

The hardest lesson every athlete learns is that we will not win every time. Whether we are hampered by illness or injury, distracted from our training, or simply having a bad day, there will be times when we do not perform to our full potential. Even when we are at our best, our best may not be good enough. It is the true beauty of sports: Records are always

broken and someone else is always training harder, getting faster, and learning new skills to set the bar higher.

By experiencing failure, athletes learn how to mentally deal with losing and bounce back to do better next time. It is an attitude adjustment. Athletes learn to think through the failure and work on preventing it the next time, using mental strength to press the reset button and move on.

Sometimes this means adjusting expectations. If the team loses too many games to make the playoffs, the new goal becomes getting a winning record or beating the remaining rival team. There is always something left to salvage and a lesson to be learned, even when falling short of the plan.

In the business world, the ability to deal with failure proves to be invaluable. No matter how hard we work, how well we prepare, or how good we think our ideas are, we will fall short at times. Just as athletes must analyze their failures and bounce back, business leaders must understand why they didn't meet expectations, adjust their plan, and mentally reset for another try.

The challenge in the business world is that winning and losing is not as black and white as it is in sports. We are not racing against a clock or scoring goals. Often, our success is in the hands of others. It is a tough pill to swallow when you feel like you did everything you could to succeed and you don't get that

“I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”

Michael Jordan,
the most decorated
basketball player in
NBA history

“A goal is not always meant to be reached. It often serves simply as something to aim at.”

Bruce Lee,
martial artist, actor,
philosopher, and filmmaker

promotion. In business, understanding what other people mean beyond what they say and building relationships matter as much as our own preparation and technical skills, and cultivating those is an important part of our “training.”

The key is to maintain a level head. Prepare hard, but maintain a “win some, lose some” attitude. Take calculated risks and, where possible, give yourself a backup plan.

GOAL SETTING

Athletes live by goals. As soon as one level of success is achieved, there will always be another time, record, or competition to beat. Athletes set these goals because without them, there is no reason to push ourselves and endure the day-to-day physical pain that comes with training.

As athletes transition from the world of sports into business, maintaining goal-setting habits puts them at an advantage and can keep them happy at work. Athletes are competitive; they are only truly happy when motivated and able to see success and measure accomplishments. In many careers, there is no obvious “win or lose” measure of success. Sometimes goals are clear (a promotion or end-of-year bonus), but sometimes they need more short-term and tangible goals.

We must learn to be creative at times, to think beyond monetary rewards or titles. Do we want to learn a new

skill? Mentor a new hire? Complete a training or certification? We do not always have “coaches” guiding our journey anymore—unless we reach out to them—and we must take on the responsibility to set goals and make a plan to achieve them.

HOW TO BE A LEADER

Athletes have plenty of opportunities to observe the best leaders in their field. Why is it that some coaches instill the drive in their athletes to show up and work hard, while other coaches struggle to get their athletes to even show up on time? We tend to mirror the people we admire and respect and take on their character traits.

Bryan Shelton, former professional tennis player and DI tennis coach, was one of the best coaches I ever had the opportunity to work with. He helped each team member achieve beyond what they thought they could. What made him such a successful coach were three principles he religiously followed:

1. See the person’s unique potential as her present ability. I still remember the first time Bryan called me into his office and asked me a simple question: “Why are you trying to hit as hard as you can when your strength is in your speed and ability to place crafty shots?” His insight into my unique strength and his belief inspired me to go beyond the motions and tap into the deeper level of the game. Belief is a powerful tool that

“ Treat a person as he is, and he will remain as he is. Treat him as what he could be, and he will become what he should be. ”

Jimmy Johnson,
former professional football player and one of the top-ranked all-time NFL coaches

“ I think you either progress or regress, so it’s either going up or down. Everybody is moving—the people, our planet—so you either keep up with it or you just stay where you are. But staying where you are, you actually regress. ”

Novak Djokovic,
current number 1-ranked professional tennis player

separates the top 1,000 players from the top 50 and a winner of a Grand Slam from a runner-up.

2. Go beyond what you require of your team. In 2011, Atlanta experienced a terrible snow and ice storm that the media dubbed “snowpocalypse.” At the time, I was still a college athlete and our entire campus had shut down, along with the city. Despite the snow, Bryan left his house at 6 a.m. to make our 10 a.m. practice on time, in spite of the possibility that the roads would be closed when he had to return home. And they were. Bryan spent the night in a nearby hotel because he was determined to prove to us, his team, that he was committed. This example instilled the willingness to do whatever it took for the common vision of the team.

3. Listen to influence. The third most valuable leadership lesson I learned from Bryan was the power of listening. He was not a talkative person. Conversations with Bryan usually occurred by talking out your ideas, followed by a few words of magical insight from him. A light bulb would go off. Suddenly you’d see the problem from a whole new perspective. No resisting change. Instead, you are now fully committed to your new belief.

Early exposure to different types of leadership help us understand what drives us and how we can apply this knowledge to the business world. Leadership is not telling other people

what to do. It takes time and effort to build character and a reputation before people can respect and trust you. Leading through inspiration is an invaluable skill that can help former athletes become great leaders of teams of all ages.

The biggest challenge athletes face is the nuance of the business world. In sport, we are used to straightforward and immediate feedback, both positive and negative. We often struggle with people who prefer to have indirect-style feedback. It is also hard for us to understand why our bosses are unhappy with us if they don't tell us exactly what they want.

POWER OF DEDICATION AND PERSISTENCE

Athletes learn early that luck is just an equation of preparation plus opportunity. All it takes is that first disappointment to understand that luck is just an empty word, unless you have the skills and capability required to win.

Sports have taught us that it is never enough to just show up to practices and give your best. You have to live and breathe it. Beyond technical skill, you also need to mold your mental and emotional skills. In order to perform at a high level consistently, you must put yourself outside of your comfort zone constantly.

Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympic swimmer of all time, used to visualize himself swimming faster and better every day, twice per day. Natalie du Toit, a swimmer and the first amputee to qualify for the Olympic games, spent hours and hours not only in the swimming pool, but also doing hours of racing and hours of mental preparation. Novak Djokovic follows a strict gluten-free diet, in addition to his grueling training program. We go above and beyond for that extra advantage and give our best every day so we will be confident with ourselves at competitions.

Athletes apply dedication and persistence to their work environment as well. They understand that success doesn't come overnight. It takes time and commitment to build the skills necessary to perform in the workplace. For them, it is never just a job. It is a challenge and an opportunity to get better every day.

The challenge is that we don't understand when someone tells us that we must have certain skills to be in a particular position. Everything comes from learning and repetition. Progress is valued, rather than mere results, so athletes do tend to overstretch themselves. The key for athletes is to understand that in the business world, you are rated based on what you deliver, so while the athletes need to keep pushing themselves, they also need to balance taking on responsibilities beyond their capabilities with the expectations the world puts on them.

PLAYING THE NEW FIELD

While athletes face many challenges when transitioning to the business world, they have many advantages in the long run. No athlete is born a winner, and it is important to understand that each person peaks at different times. Athletes learn the valuable lesson of patience and determination throughout their time on the field or court. While it can be tempting to aim for short-term recognition or quick wins, an athlete-turned-businessman's lessons in attitude, vision, and daily commitment can be an asset in the long run. ■

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