

Mentally Tough

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Why are Lance Armstrong, Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan often referred to as being the greatest of all time in their respective sports? Is it due to genetics or opportunity? To nature or nurturing? Were they naturals destined to succeed if they were only given the chance to appear on the playing field?

These are hard questions to answer because it's difficult to separate natural ability from hard work. But one thing we can certainly see in these three exemplary athletes is their dedication to improvement. Armstrong was well known for his daily six-hour rides, repeated practice on key routes in the Tour de France, and weighing every bite of food that went into his mouth.

After Woods won the 1997 Masters Tournament by a record 14 strokes over second place he set about improving his swing so he could be even better. After winning the four major tournaments on the PGA Tour in succession, the only man to ever do so, he again went back to work on improving his swing. And he has single handedly changed the work ethic among most of the formerly fat and flabby pro golfers.

After being cut from his junior high school basketball team Jordan was more determined than ever to prove himself. Never one to rest on his laurels, Jordan is well known among basketball fans for staying after practice to work on his "weaknesses."

It would appear that hard work was a major component in the success of each of these athletes. But was it the main reason for their success? Recent research seems to indicate that the answer is “yes.” This research goes even farther by suggesting that it takes ten years of focused work on one’s sport to reach the threshold of greatness. That is certainly true with the three athletes described above.

As a coach for 26 years I’ve seen essentially the same thing—the athlete improves physiologically for about seven years and continues to improve performances for at least another three years just because he or she is wiser in regards to what it takes in training, racing and lifestyle to succeed. This timeline holds true regardless of the age at which the athlete starts training and competing.

The key to all of this hard work over many years is more mental than physical, I believe. Being mentally tough is what eventually produces high level performance in athletes once they have achieved their physiological peak. What does it take to be mentally tough? There are four qualities I look for in athletes who say they want to perform at the highest levels:

- Motivation. Can you train alone or do you need to be with others to complete hard sessions? Do you workout regardless of environmental conditions such as rain, snow, wind, heat, darkness or other potential training interruptions?

- Discipline. Do you shape your training and lifestyle to fit your goals? How important to you are nutrition, sleep, periodization, goal setting, skills, attitude, health, and strength?
- Confidence. Do you go into a race with a plan? Do you believe you can succeed even when the conditions are not favorable? Which do you think more about—the controllable or the uncontrollable variables? Do you believe you can or question if you can?
- Patience. Do you need immediate success or can you postpone it until the time is right for you even if that is years in the future?

My experience has been that if any one of these mental toughness qualities is lacking the athlete will not achieve his or her lofty career goals. When I am interviewing an athlete to see if we can work together I ask lots of questions to measure these mental skills. Few athletes have high levels in all of them. I've only coached one athlete in more than two decades who I felt was exceptionally mentally tough. He became US Olympic team member. I am currently coaching a young athlete who also appears to have exceptional mental toughness. But only time will tell.

Can you improve your mental toughness? It is philosophically possible, but unfortunately, I don't think every athlete will. This is perhaps where the nurturing part of the success equation is most evident. Some parents seem to instill and refine these mental toughness qualities in their children at an early age. Others don't. What do the successful parents do that's different? I wish I knew. It is probably hundreds of seemingly insignificant interactions that take place on a

daily basis from birth through the formative years. This is beyond my expertise as a coach.

Perhaps the best thing you could do to improve your mental toughness skills is to work with a sports psychologist much the same as you would work with a coach.

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