

learn

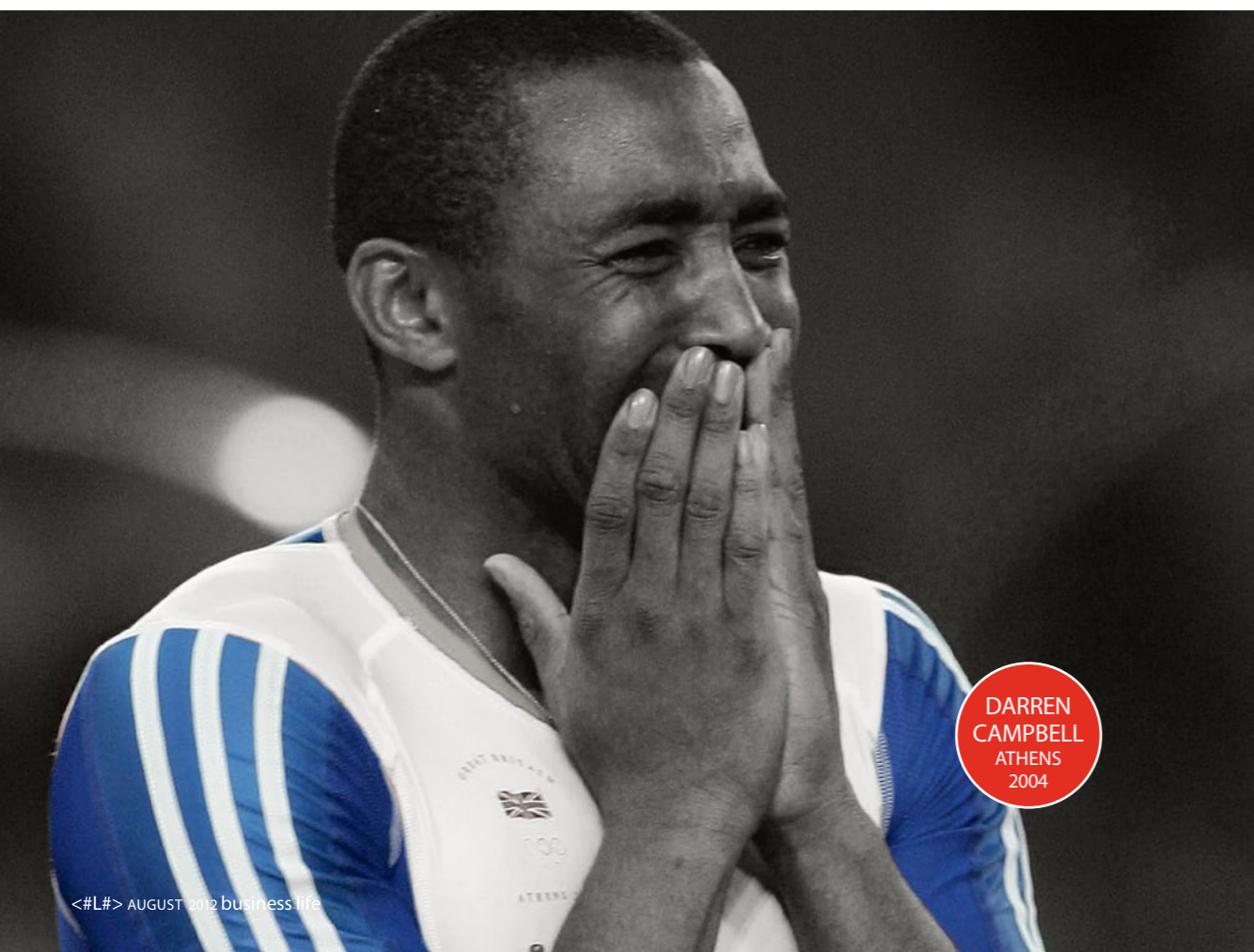


SARAH
AYTON
ATHENS
2004



BEN
HUNT-DAVIS
SYDNEY
2000

WINNING STRATEGIES



DARREN
CAMPBELL
ATHENS
2004



STEVE
BACKLEY
SYDNEY
2000

Four British Olympians recall their greatest moments at the Games and explain the business lessons we can all draw from their experiences. Interviews by Dominic Midgley



STRIVE FOR CLARITY

STEVE BACKLEY OBE, 43, is the only British athlete to have won medals at three different Olympic Games, taking javelin bronze at Barcelona 1992, and silver at Atlanta 1996 and Sydney 2000. He is now a motivational speaker and Radio 5 Live commentator.

My biggest success was the first of my Olympic silver medals because I had surgery on an Achilles tendon ten weeks beforehand. It was one of those situations where it was effectively all but over and to come away with a medal and to nearly pull off a win was incredible.

Having said that, when I won the second silver, I threw an Olympic record and 99 times out of a 100 that would have won the competition but unfortunately for me I had a career that clashed with one of the all-time greats in Jan Železný.

It was when I was going around on crutches prior to Atlanta that I picked up some of the most valuable lessons I ever learned. It was a fantastic experience to work with two guys in particular: one household name in Paul McKenna [the TV hypnotist] and the other Professor Dave Collins, a very good sports psychologist.

As I was unable to train physically, I did all my prep in my head. It was quite a challenging experience but one that was invaluable for the rest of my career because I realised the value of what the mind can do.

The main skill I brushed up on was the ability to visualise and see what the future might hold. Once you have mastered this you can almost pre-empt the future by visualising in your mind's eye in massive detail.

I believe that at the elite level of sport there is no such thing as the individual. You stand there, as I did, having to chuck the spear but you are very much a product of the team – a bit like the pilot of an airplane.

What sport does is offer a context for us to make the parallels to how we all strive to deliver at a higher level by believing in a plan or developing a culture. All this is very prevalent in a sporting context. It's not that it's better or worse, but it is precise and transparent and so easy to draw parallels from. The real world is less clear, obvious and transparent and I think that is why we need to design and build clarity and cascade that down through organisations, because that is what effective teams do.

Among chief execs or senior leadership teams, you will find personality types that are very similar to highly effective sportspeople. Indeed, you quite often find people at the top of businesses who have played sport at a very high level.

In terms of work ethic, dedication, bounce-back and dealing with adversity, all that stuff has been carried over from sport and they've thrived in business because of that tenacity and doggedness and robustness.



KEEP THINGS SIMPLE

SARAH AYTON OBE, 32, was a gold medal-winner in the Yngling sailing class at both Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008. She now conducts motivational learning events through organisational development consultancy Ayton Lee.

We went into the final race in Beijing one point ahead of the Dutch. The race was scheduled for the day before it actually took place but there was no wind that day and, after waiting on the water for about six hours, we were sent in and had to prepare for the next day. When we woke up the next morning it was blowing 25 knots and smashing waves, which was unheard of in China, and we just thought to ourselves, "Yee-haa!" We were specialists in those conditions and we knew exactly what needed to be done.

In sailing I think that once you've won the start it's pretty much a done deal unless you have a wipeout or something like that. So we won the start and went through to win that final race. Crossing the line as a double Olympic champion was a really sweet moment, especially doing it with a team that believed in each other 100 per cent and backed each other.

In sailing, the teamwork is really vital. Sailing skills are obviously important but, by the time you get to the Games, everyone can tack and drive and turn and is pretty fast around the course. Our edge came from how we worked as a team. After every debrief, we would be able to look each other in the eye without any bad feeling. I think we all know what it's like, even with our partners, when there's been an issue and you can't bear to look at each other. We made sure that would never happen.

My team-mate Sarah Gosling and I give Olympic motivational speeches, with me giving the perspective of the team leader and Sarah that of the crew member. When you are team building it's important to learn what people's strengths are and not have them doing things that they're not very good at. You can then turn the things they are good at into super strengths.

When Sarah and I do our presentations, we give an example of how we would do that, whether it be in logistical planning or actually on the water.

People are surprised by the amount of detail that's involved in our sport. In terms of business, the key is to keep things really simple: having the process, the goals and – most importantly – the review element. Some of those things tend to be overlooked.

In other cases there are too many people or actions to go through to get a decision, which makes decision-making hard. This leads to a lack of ownership from people, which creates a lack of engagement. In our world, each member of the team has 100 per cent accountability for the job that is theirs to own.



BUILD TEAM SPIRIT

DARREN CAMPBELL MBE, 38, was a gold medal-winning member of the 4x100m relay team at Athens 2004. He also won an individual silver in the 200m at Sydney 2000. He is now a partner in PAS, a producer of sports nutrition products.

I remember that morning in Athens and thinking, "This is destiny day." I had a great feeling that something special was going to happen. Four years previously we had got knocked out in the semi-final and the media had already written us off. It was one of those situations in life where you've got nothing to lose and you have to have full belief in yourself that on any given day anything is possible.

We knew what our strength was – we were a team with a great team spirit. We knew the Americans were four great individuals but were they going to be able to come together collectively as a team? Our strategy going into the race was: if we're able to stay cool under pressure, maybe they will make a mistake.

I ran the second leg because it is actually further than the 100m. Being a 200m sprinter it meant that was the best place for me to use my strength. I didn't watch the final two changeovers, I was on my knees, saying a prayer! The first I knew about the result was when I got tapped on my shoulder by a Nigerian athlete, who said, "You're Olympic champions." I think we won by one thousandth of a second!

Mindset is very important, especially when you are trying to run your own business. I have a sports nutrition company, which I set up six years ago, and I've learnt how vital it is to believe in what you're doing and to try to do everything to the best of your ability.

But probably the most important thing is to motivate your staff, which reminds me a lot of what we were trying to do to win that Olympic gold. If we're going to be successful, then we all have to play a part. Whether it's the smallest part or the largest part, we're all contributing to the success of the business.

If people don't see that and they feel that they're just working for me or for my business partner then I may not get the best out of them. But when everyone feels a part of the business, we all share the success, just as we share the failure. It creates a greater harmony and people will go that extra mile.

You never appreciate how difficult business is. It is great coming up with an idea, but how do you execute that idea and how do you make yourself shine when there are so many competitors out there? It's no different from sport. All you can do is go out each day and try and be the best.



MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BEN HUNT-DAVIS, 40, was a member of the gold medal-winning men's coxed eight at Sydney 2000. He now runs corporate development company Point8 and co-wrote *Will it Make the Boat Go Faster? Olympic-Winning Strategies for Everyday Success*

The final in Sydney went exactly according to our plan, which was to take the lead from the very, very first stroke. It worked well for the first 1600m, then we died a horrible death and everyone came piling back, but we always knew that was going to happen and so we executed what we wanted to do

absolutely brilliantly. The margin of victory was 0.8 of a second, so slightly less than a third of a length.

Throughout our preparations, our approach to every single issue revolved around the question, "Will it make the boat go faster?" This even extended to whether we should attend the opening ceremony. When we concluded that it would be of no benefit to our primary goal, we decided not to go.

I think that a lot of people in business don't really know what their equivalent question is. They spend their time really busy doing what's in front of them, what they've done before, what they are comfortable with, rather than working on issues that are actually going to make the difference.

People should spend some time thinking what question would have similar value to them. How can they challenge themselves? What's going to take them in the direction they really want to go? What's going to make a difference to their cause?

During our training we had to make sure we were learning from every single thing we did so we could get faster. That meant spending time reviewing performances, talking about what worked and what didn't work, so that we were learning and improving every day. Again, this is something many companies don't really do.

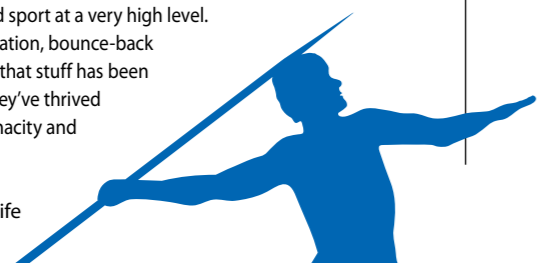
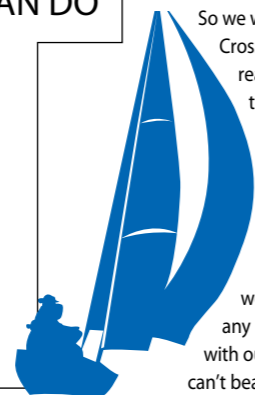
I did some work with a big project group from BP a few years ago. We spent a lot of time looking at the behaviours they needed to develop to achieve their goals. There was a go-live date and so the "What will make the boat go faster?" question translated very easily to helping them finish on time and within budget. One of the things they changed was the way they communicated. They started to be more honest and open with each other, having harder conversations because they knew it was going to help get the project live.

I REALISED THE VALUE OF WHAT THE MIND CAN DO

YOU HAVE TO LEARN WHAT PEOPLE'S STRENGTHS ARE

WE HAD TO LEARN FROM EVERYTHING WE DID

TO BE SUCCESSFUL WE ALL HAVE TO PLAY A PART



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