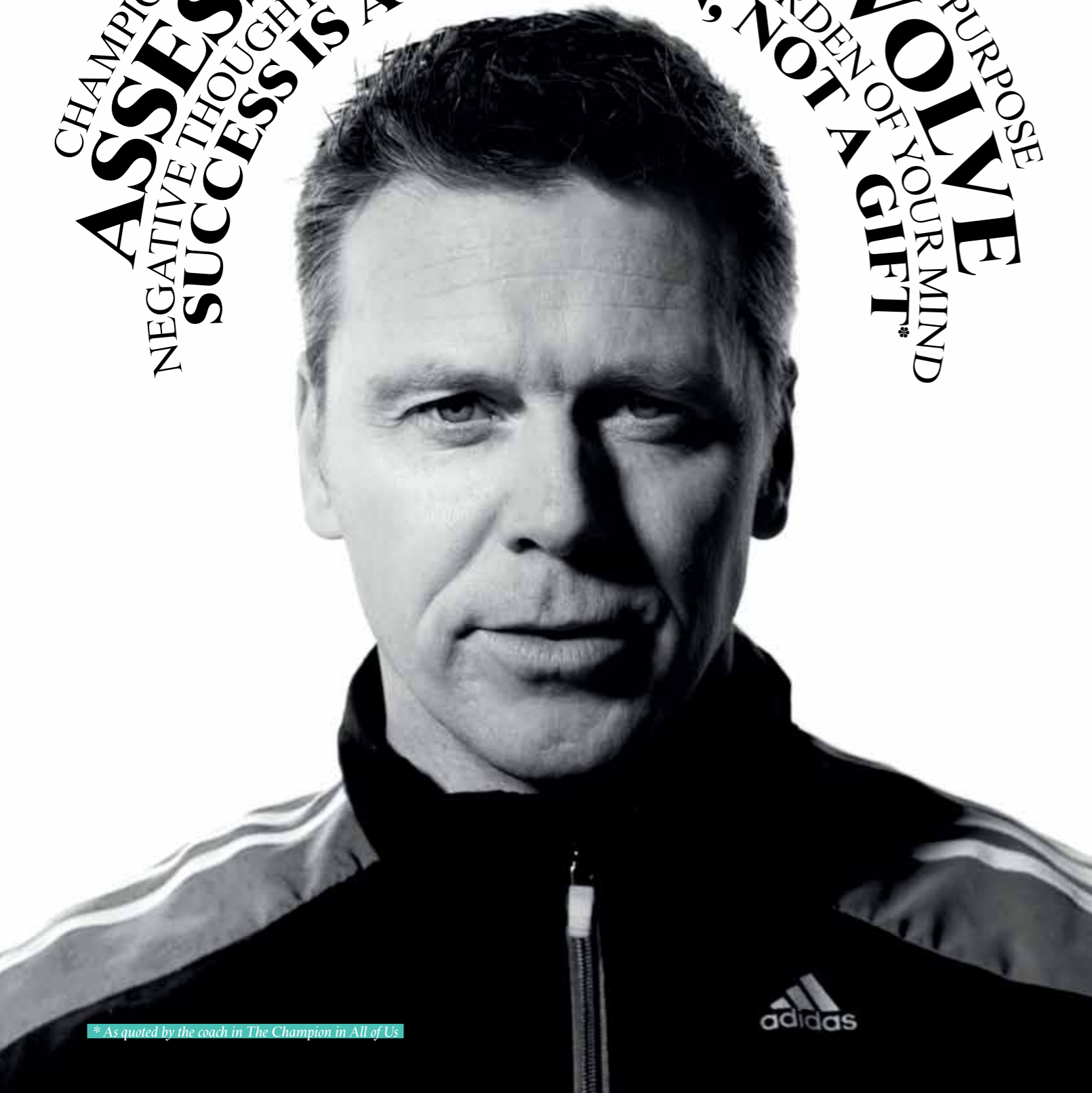


The Force is strong with Backley and his book's Yoda-like coach

CHAMPIONS HAVE CLARITY OF VISION AND A CLEAR PURPOSE  
ASSESS... ADOPT... EVOLVE  
NEGATIVE THOUGHTS ARE WEEDS IN THE GARDEN OF YOUR MIND  
SUCCESS IS A DECISION, NOT A GIFT\*



\*As quoted by the coach in *The Champion in All of Us*

# FIND YOUR INNER CHAMPION

*Former javelin world record holder Steve Backley knows what it takes to win, but in his coaching career he's realised not everyone is hard-wired to achieve success in the same way*

Words Jonathan Manning Pictures Richard Faulks

"THERE ARE three types of people in this world," says the fictitious coaching guru at the heart of *The Champion in All of Us*. "Firstly, there are people who make things happen. Then there are people who watch things happen. Lastly there are people who ask, 'What happened?'"

Like so many philosophies for life, the simplicity of the book's ideals belies the difficulty of achieving and maintaining them. So its author, multi-medalled former javelin world record holder Steve Backley, simplifies the foundations of greater performance to just 12 rules, to transform those who "could've, should've and would've" – in the words of Backley's Yoda-like tutor, a virtual representation of his ideal coach – into those that "did".

"Be passionate, embrace change, be confident in what you do, and get on and do it," Backley says, simplifying further.

The lure of being more successful at sport, work and life is intoxicating, but the journey to achieve this demands honest answers to difficult questions. "Champions," says the coach, "know themselves and are not afraid of being brutally honest in their self-appraisal."

So when Backley rhetorically asks, "Where are you, where do you want to go and how will you get there?" the answer has to begin with a frank personal assessment. Are you as fit as you think you are, as clear about your goals as you imagine and as committed to achieving them as you pretend? Even your goals may need reconsidering.

When he set out on his coaching career, Backley saw goals uniquely in the form of setting measurable performance targets, such as personal best times, distances jumped or thrown or victories. Now, however, he's not so sure that such an approach is universally applicable.

"Now I think only a certain demographic, like hard-wired competitive sportsmen, thinks like that," says Backley. "So my advice is to know what makes you tick. Having a passion about what you want to achieve is absolutely key. If your fitness goal is about enjoyment, interaction and sociability then make sure you enjoy it and make that your focus."

So don't feel guilty about post-race beers with friends or mid-ride coffee and cakes with your cycling club if sociability is a core element of your fitness ambitions.

"But if you are performance led, build a plan that fits the outcome," says Backley. "Begin with the end in mind – it's what Olympic athletes do. So if your goal is to lose a stone, visualise what you would look like, feel like, how your clothes would fit, how confident you would feel on holiday. And then work back from that with your plans."

Thoughtful and articulate, Backley is happy to digress into a fascinating discussion on the very concept of 'fitness'. Using Darwin's argument of the survival of the fittest, he suggests that a shot-putter is 'fitter' than a 10k runner because his explosive speed and strength would make him faster over the first 30 yards, so he'd catch and eat the

*continues over>*

runner! 'Fit for purpose' is a better measure, he suggests, divorcing the idea of fitness from body shape, which is more a reflection of diet. So how does Backley, complete with hip replacement, stay fit? "If I haven't got a clear goal, if I don't have an event in three months, I fluff along and don't really train," he admits. "I leverage myself by committing to something – it needs to be competitive, challenging and stimulating. The essence is in the journey; the doing it is the fun bit. There is a rostrum in every world – you can always get on one, it just depends what you take on."

Which is a neat return to his opening question of 'where are you, where are you going to go?' Is it enough to be the fastest cyclist in your family, the quickest runner in Acacia Avenue, or are you really going to fulfil your potential, whatever your age, physique or talent.

As the coach says in *The Champion in All of Us*, you can't change your genetics, but you can change how you use them. You can't change your biological age, but you can change what you do at your age. The challenge is always to push on, to accept that there is a vast area of unexploited potential beyond what you perceive to be your maximum.

The true measure of your performance comes, "when you look in the mirror – it will not lie to you", says Backley. So while the colour of your medal is dictated by how other competitors perform, when you see your reflection you know how hard you trained and how committed you were.

"When I won my Olympic bronze I could not look at myself in the mirror because I'd under-performed," reveals Backley. "When I won my second Olympic silver, 14 weeks



## “When I won Olympic bronze I could not look at myself in the mirror... I'd under-performed”

after knee surgery and breaking the Olympic record, I knew I could not have done any better. So when I looked in the mirror I looked like I imagine a lottery winner looks. It hurt not to win, but I knew I had given my all.”

He still speaks of “peering into the abyss” as a metaphor for identifying where your limits lie. In an endurance sport it may be the discomfort of running or cycling in the breathless anaerobic zone. In a power sport like javelin, going into the abyss is perhaps better measured in injuries (Backley endured nine operations during his career).

When we meet he's training for a five-mile race in the Olympic park, and needs to sense the pleasure-pain combination of pushing himself to the limit. “It doesn't

matter if I run 35, 37 or 40 minutes, so long as I have had a little look over the edge of the abyss,” he admits. “I no longer need to go over it, but I need to have a peep.”

In his book, the coach tells his athletes that while they only get one life, they will still have hundreds, even thousands of chances – it's up to them how they convert these chances.

Too often Backley encounters people who only realise this when it's almost too late. “Normally the penny drops just before retirement and that leaves them frustrated,” he says. “I'd like to find a way to shift personal awareness forward a few years so you do not wait for the end to realise it.” ■

*The Champion in All of Us* by Steve Backley, £9.99, [miragepublishing.com](http://miragepublishing.com)



The 'mirror' test always reveals how well you've performed

### Backley's medal count

● Gold ● Silver ● Bronze

- 1990 European Championships
- 1990 Commonwealth Games
- 1992 Olympic Games
- 1994 European Championships
- 1994 Commonwealth Games
- 1995 World Championships
- 1996 Olympic Games
- 1997 World Championships
- 1998 European Championships
- 1998 Commonwealth Games
- 2000 Olympic Games
- 2002 European Championships
- 2002 Commonwealth Games