



# HOW OLYMPIC DREAMS TURN INTO REALITY

By Matt Jevon

**In the aftermath of the 2008 Olympics, Matt Jevon explores how our most exceptional athletes train themselves to be the best, both physically and mentally. Creating a winning culture necessitates developing consistency in performance and embedding a winning mentality – an approach that is mirrored by The Huthwaite Approach. By identifying the behaviours that need to change, developing a process for change, assessing and measuring improvement and reinforcing behaviours over time, whether in sports or in business, the behavioural change approach is what delivers winning and lasting results.**

For Great Britain's Olympic team, a succession of great days was enjoyed at the Beijing Olympics. Yet success was clearly limited to particular sports, and not just to those with high levels of financial resource. Athletics received £26.5 million in the four years leading up to Beijing but failed to meet very low medal targets. Which proves that success relies on

much more than just financial investment. The experience of 'a great day' for high performance athletes is, without exception, the culmination of a consistent and detailed preparation phase, often built over years of thorough and expert attention to the mental, physical, tactical and technical aspects affecting performance.

So what affects performance? There are of course the obvious issues such as physical conditioning, tactical and technical skills. Yet we see in many sports the most talented athletes underachieve time and time again e.g. England's football team. It is not sufficient therefore to focus solely on those issues that are directly linked to performance; the indirect factors can have - cumulatively - an even greater impact.


Developing consistency in performance requires the creation of winning cultures, embedded in environments where excellence is normal.

The definition of culture: the sum

total of the ideas, beliefs, customs, values, knowledge and material artefacts that are handed down from one generation to the next in a society.

The key words here are 'sum total', that is no stone is left unturned, no issues left as 'OK' or 'good enough', but that all factors are embedded within a winning culture at a level of excellence.

**19 Gold, 13  
Silver, 15  
Bronze. Great  
Britain was  
fourth in the  
medal table  
behind China,  
USA and Russia.  
And first based  
on medals per  
head of  
population.**



In Harvard Business Review (June 08), Takeuchi et al describe a unique culture in Toyota, a culture of contradictions, yet a culture of excellence that has allowed Toyota to consistently outperform in all its sectors. Don't be caught in the trap that excellence is steady and predictable, it certainly isn't!

Athletes and highly successful business people choose when they train, rest and refuel. They ensure the environments are as facilitative as possible and match up to the challenge faced. When performance times are changed, then athletes adapt by manipulating their preferred times when energies are high, to match when the performance is needed. Training camps for Beijing were set up in Macau and some athletes were out there two to three weeks ahead of the games. The sailing teams had been in Beijing on and off for the previous three years.

This is often referred to in sport as 'getting into the zone' before events, something that has traditionally been done in the last hour or so before the event, and we now know it needs to be inbuilt at least 48 hours ahead. The same principle applies before a big sales pitch or investors presentation, but for these scenarios it is more about building a detailed understanding of the pitch and the context in which it is being presented. Knowing the content and context inside out enables agility and measured spontaneity when 'the game begins'.

High-performing athletes work very hard and in some detail on their pre-performance routines to ensure that mentally as well as physically they are 'in the zone'. Getting into the zone has been a very broadly described concept, so what does it actually mean?



According to the task we face, we need to be optimally ready. Our instincts often take over when we are faced with a threatening situation - fight or flight, that burst of adrenaline, alertness and heightened sensory anticipation that we gain. For athletes involved in collision or contact sports, this degree of physical and mental activation is highly appropriate; however, contrast this say to an Olympic target shooter who can almost stop his heart beating in order not to affect his aim. Indeed within some sports there is a need to switch between high and low activation levels: take rugby where a hooker may need power and aggression in a scrum, then a very fine degree of delicate skill when throwing a ball over 10m in a lineout to a 40cm square target, namely the jumper's hand.


The type of focus and the intensity of the optimisation can and should be very different then for different situations, even in the same sport or indeed business setting. Often what is described as nerves is in fact too much or inappropriate activation for the task in hand.

We are all also naturally inclined to go to a default trait of activation when faced with a challenge. These responses are unique to each of us as they are based on our brain chemistry, our own previous experiences and often the social influences that have shaped us as we grew up.

It is essential, therefore, to prepare and practice getting into the zone. Athletes do this through practicing consistent performance routines (sometimes seen as superstitions such as lucky socks or running out last from the tunnel), through to learning to use appropriate cues, just as actors do, to switch into best situational matched responses.

A typical pre-match routine might include an element of relaxation to get to a baseline from which to start the preparation; music and quiet can help; then athletes often use imagery to experience the elements of a great performance. Imagery is distinct from visualisation in that in imagery all the senses, touch, taste, smell, vision and hearing, are engaged to make the experience more complete. Over perhaps 20 minutes or so, between physical preparation and talks from coaches and managers, players will find space to complete these imagery sessions. They will try and do it the same way each time so that the cues and their response to those cues are consistent.

What we do, in sports or business performance terms, will always be the sum of what we think and what we feel. Managing the energies that control this, valuing excellence in our culture and creating facilitative environments - every time - will lead to great days, every day.



**"High performance is about consistency. One great day is not enough; it is about every day being great."**

## **MATT JEVON** PERFORMANCE SYNERGIST

Matt Jevon is an internationally renowned performance synergist working with high performance sports and business people who are aiming to achieve more, remove barriers and both increase and maintain their competitive edge. For the last 20 years Matt has been involved in sport at world-class levels, working with national teams from Australia, USA, New Zealand and even Great Britain's Olympians. Matt not only works directly with the high performers but also in a complementary and supportive capacity with coaches and technical staff.