Psychological Characteristics of Champions

In 2001, Daniel Gould and his colleagues from the University of North Carolina Greensboro conducted a study to find out what characteristics were shared by Olympic champions. Specifically, these researchers were asked by the United States Olympic Committee to explore the psychological characteristics of very successful Olympic champions. In the study, they interviewed and surveyed ten of the most successful USA Olympians in the history of the modern Olympic Games. As a reference, competing from 1976 to 1998, these athletes earned 32 Olympic medals including 28 gold. From this research, Gould and his colleagues identified a number of psychological attributes that these athletes shared.

In this issue, I provide an overview of these psychological characteristics as well as explore how these relate to success in bowling. Clearly, these characteristics can help every bowler be a more complete competitor. Let's find-out what factors you share with champions and what areas you need to improve.

Coachable
All ten of the champion athletes in the study had a high level of coachability. That is, they were able to allow another person direct their training. Although they were the best in their sport, each was humble and possessed a willingness to learn from someone else, a qualified coach. This is not unusual in elite sport. Tiger Woods has a swing coach. And, many successful PBA members employ the coaching services of coaches like Richard Shockley or John Jowdy. These champions work with a coach, with an open mind, because they know that this will make them a better and more complete competitor than working alone in isolation.

Yet, ironically, many bowlers possess the opposite characteristics as described in the study. In my experience, few very good bowlers will actually seek assistance to improve their game to become a great bowler. Perhaps, there lack of willingness is an ego thing or a fear of failure and exposing their weaknesses to someone else.

Which are you? Are you humble about your game and ready to be coached or are you too egocentric? My guess is the first. By reading this magazine, you have demonstrated a willingness to learn. If you are ready to improve, visit http://www.bowl.com/coaching/findacoach.aspx and find a USBC certified Silver or Gold-Level coach near you. These coaches can help you identify strengths and weaknesses and assist you in building a more complete game.

High Motivation & Commitment
The research also revealed that these Olympic champions were extremely motivated. These champions were driven to accomplish and achieve at the highest level. All ten were very goal oriented and each was highly committed. They developed goals and worked toward these goals. This reminds me of Tiger Woods actually practicing for hours before tee time and hours after completing his round.
But, you can’t be driven without goals. As a coach, I ask my athletes to establish both short-term and long-term goals. With the short-term goals, we use performance data to identify strengths and weaknesses in their game. Frankly, data reveals the truth and this becomes the baseline data set for monthly performance goals. By establishing goals, as a bowler, you will measure your performances based on the goals rather than score or tournament placement. This will help you to see areas of improvement objectively. After establishing the goals, you need to work, in practice and competition, toward these goals.

Furthermore, motivation leads to discipline and dedication to achieve these goals. If you want to be successful on the PBA Tour or at challenging amateur events, then you must expose yourself to failure in order to learn. Are you truly dedicated? Are you committed to improving? For example, are you bowling in a sport league or in PBA regional events to improve your game? As Denny Torgerson stated in the April 2006 issue, “[t]he best was to learn to bowl on the PBA Regional Tour is to just go do it, take note of your mistakes, and try to learn from other players by observing what they do well.” This takes dedication because your are likely to fail before you succeed. Do you practice areas of weakness several times each week? Do you clean your bowling equipment after each use and periodically? Do you attempt to use a pre-shot routine and visualization as well as practice these techniques?

**Optimistic and Positive**

How positive are you? All ten athletes in the study had a very positive outlook. As Gould and colleagues write, “[t]heir optimistic personalities caused them to look at the athletic glass as half full versus half empty.” This allowed them to be optimistic about the present as well as future. In addition, these athletes had very high levels of hope and believed that they could perform well.

Becoming an elite bowler requires knowledge. And, to achieve this knowledge, you must be confident and dedicated enough to allow failure as part of the learning process. Once you are knowledgeable and practice around the areas of knowledge to improve weak areas then you will become skilled. And, this skill builds confidence. Examples of knowledge and skill include being able to change releases confidently, altering speed with consistency, playing all parts of the lane comfortably, altering the surface and choosing layouts to match-up to tournament conditions. Once you are competent as a complete bowler you will be confident in a positive way.

One practice technique that will help build your confidence is what I called strike around. Strike around forces you to practice playing the lanes from all angles. Use the breakpoint of the lane condition to establish an exit point at the end of the pattern. Now, throw to the breakpoint straight down the outside boards. Next, move in to play tighter to the breakpoint. Continue on by moving left and playing to the same breakpoint. This will open the shot and force you to play in more. You want to practice five to six distinct angles of attack using the same exit point at the end of the condition. Clearly, you will need to adjust speed, angle of attack, hand positions, loft, etc. Don’t change the bowling ball when you practice this. The goal is to build confidence playing all parts of the lane not just changing...
equipment. The more you do this in practice, the more skilled you will become. The more skilled, the more confident you will become.

**Positive Perfectionists**
These Olympic champions were also positive perfectionists. They are well organized and have high standards yet they don’t get trapped into negativity because they don’t worry about making mistakes or criticism from others. This allows them to work toward their high expectations without wasting energy on negativity. Champions just don’t worry when mistakes happen. They accept the errors and move on.

To illustrate, if you take my advice above and try to complete strike around, you will likely fail at the beginning. How will you react to this failure? Will you be able to do the practice in uncomfortable parts of the lane when peers are watching you struggle and performing badly? Or, will you go back to your comfort level, eyes closed, throwing to the dry and striking at will. Yes, it is cool to strike. But, champions are focused on their goals. They are positive when mistakes happen. In other words, they see the forest through the trees.

Do you worry about missing your last spare or not striking when you hit the pocket? Are you always focused on what went wrong or blaming the lanes? If so, make an effort to focus on each individual shot rather than the score or the previous shots. Really focus on only the next shot. Make it the best possible shot you can possibly make. Go through the entire pre-shot routine with visualization. After the shot is over, reflect, move on. Move on to the next shot.

As a competitive bowler, you can engage in a few activities to improve your positive thoughts. First, make a list of positive statements about yourself and your game. This is not intended to be ego inflation but, rather, specific positive statements based on the truth. Use your data for goal-setting to build positive statements. For example, you might say to yourself, “I am well prepared to play any part of the lane because of my strike around practice.” Or, “each lane condition has a high scoring line and I will find it.” Make a list of ten positive statements. Keep this with you and state them frequently. Another good activity is keeping a practice success journal. Keep a journal of each practice session. Jot down positive statements about the practice. This could be as simple as “I was incredibly focused for the entire practice” or “I made 100 percent of my spares today.” You will be surprised at how this will help your attitude by focusing on the positive.

**Uncanny Ability to Focus**
The Olympic champions were really able to tune-out distractions. These folks were able to practice and compete with an incredible level of concentration. Are you able to be in the moment with your bowling when you need to be? In bowling, mental focus is essential to making a good shot. Can you remember your last shot with enough specificity to be confident in making a move? Do you watch your colleagues as they bowl in an effort to be proactive? Do you let little distractions like noise impact your performance? And, I always chuckle when a bowler needs more than two lanes of lane courtesy. What are they doing on the lanes? How can
you be a great bowler if you are focused more on lane courtesy than executing a great shot? Clearly, these bowlers are more worried about being distracted than focusing on a good shot with concentration. Get yourself into the flow.

**Ability to Cope with Stress and Adversity**

Olympic champions are able to deal effectively with stress and adverse situations. Bowling at an elite level requires one to not be effected by being overly aroused mentally while bowling. Studies in arousal have shown that optimal arousal of an athlete is slightly aroused half-way between high and low. Those who are impacted negatively by stress become over anxious because they are too aroused. And, this negatively impacts performance. The Olympian champions all had low-trait anxious personalities and had great control over their emotions in competition.

To improve your ability to deal with stress, practice visualizing yourself in challenging settings. For example, imagine yourself stepping-up in the tenth frame to win the U.S. Open on television for $100,000. What are the sights and sounds? Imagine as vividly as possible. Use a pre-shot and successful shot visualization process in your visualization practice. Yes, you are practicing visualization inside a visualization. Take yourself through situations that have been stressful in the past. The more serious you are about seeing yourself in the future moment, the easier it will be for you when you actually arrive in a stressful situation. Champions have a way of relishing this type of moment and perform better. But, champion athletes practice being in the moment mentally to prepare. They take the stress and transform it to an optimal stressor rather than being overly aroused and thinking about failure.

In addition, when you compete at a high-level event have a back-up plan when your original plan falls through. Literally, make a plan for such things as the following possibilities and those like it: (1) your equipment doesn’t arrive with your flight; (2) your clothing doesn’t arrive with your flight; (3) your squad time is delayed for three hours; (4) your squad time is running behind and you don’t know when you will start. These psychological preparations will allow you not to be distracted by reality and you will be able to deal with adversity.

**Sports Intelligence**

The final characteristic that Gould and his team found in each of the ten athletes was sports intelligence. The Olympic champions were very good at analyzing performance, being a quick study of new technique, able to make good decisions and a student of the sport.

In bowling, the sport is constantly evolving with new cover stocks and core technology. How much knowledge do you possess about playing different lane conditions? Have you bowled in a sport league and made an effort to try some new releases? How much do you know about appropriate bowling ball layouts and surface preparation for specific lane conditions?
If you want to be an elite bowler, you need to have an incredible amount of knowledge. Knowledge plus practice leads to competence and confidence. In addition, I recommend that you use data associated with your league and tournament performances. How many times do you hit the pocket? What is your carry percentage when you hit the pocket? How good a spare shooter are you? Is your performance consistent or are there phases of a competition in which you suffer due to a lack of appropriate adjustments during transition? This will allow you to analyze your performances.

**Mentally Tough**
In addition, the researchers found that the Olympic Champions were mentally tough. In a nutshell, the characteristics discussed above can be viewed collectively as mental toughness. How mentally tough are you? Rate yourself in each of the categories, 1 to 10, 10 being high and 1 being low, to determine your level of mental toughness and possession of champion characteristics.

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**References**