

Great Athletes: Masters of Humanity

By Dave de Hart

It is easy to agree, as history tells us, that athletics and individual physical abilities have been and continue to be a very important part of the different cultures within the vastness of mankind. Additionally, great warriors or athletes have and are still today placed in the highest esteem of most societies of the world. Let us explore, with these facts in mind, just how these exceptional athletes develop and excel. It is rare to see more athletes than spectators at any type or level of sporting event. Despite man's widespread interest in sports, there are very few full-time athletes.

The number of people participating in recreational and fitness sporting events has increased in recent years; however there are still many more non participants than there are athletes. There are obviously far more indifferent players than there are major athletes, and far more major athletes than there are great champions. Great athletes show us what we might or could be if we were allowed to operate at the full limits of our body's capacities.

What's the difference? Who are those among us that reach the pinnacle? How can I reach this level? It would be wonderful if the answers were simple ones. Athletes and success are complex, difficult, ever-changing and different for each individual. Few people work at becoming all they can be, and fewer still achieve a disciplined mastery of their body. The standards that are often given to reach the goals of great athletic achievement are hard work, dedication, enthusiasm, aggression, confidence, technical skills, tactical awareness, fitness, etc. I suppose we could look to the athletes that have excelled to the top and say, "that's what it takes." Of course, that may not be what it takes for you. Over the years some valuable insights have been gained; reaching difficult goals is a learned and adapting process, it is different for each athlete and will often take more than one expected.

Athletes must be willing to learn, make changes and sacrifice to reach their goals. This philosophy holds true at any level. It simply applies to athletes striding to compete at a higher level. Author and sports philosopher, Paul Weiss stated this point very well in his book, *Sports a Philosophic Inquiry*:

"The excellence that the athlete wants to attain is an excellence greater than that attained before. He wants to do better than he had; he would like to do better than anyone ever did. What he once achieved and what he might now achieve is an excellence relative to some particular period of time and circumstance."

Athletes cannot be afraid or unwilling to change their means of approach. You have to; if the approach either physical or mental isn't getting the job done, try something different. Often times this will apply to a player's attitude and approach towards the game itself or to his or her preparational training methods. Physically a player must be multifaceted, both technically and tactically and be able to adapt and adjust too many different styles of play and situations. On a social level an athlete is almost certain to have to make some social time sacrifices. This can

range from additional training to mental concentration time before a match or game. Top level athletes cannot allow complacency or afford to accept anything less than the desired goal. They do not want to be caught in the, "if I had just" zone! I'm certain that very few athletes have ever really felt what it's like to give everything.

The big key may be sacrifice. All great athletes have made great sacrifices. These sacrifices can be personal, physical or social, but some extra time and energy are necessary. If an athlete is not willing to pay the price, then they cannot expect the rewards. It is an athlete's prowess and virtues that are displayed during athletic development and competition. It is he or she that must make the judgments; it is he or she that struggles and strives; it is he or she that must challenge. In the end it is the individual athlete who must decide whether or not to make sacrifices beyond the point where others can or are willing.

There are a few catches to the risk of making such sacrifices. An athlete can never know the complete price without the fortune of hind-sight. Athletes train blindly, hoping it will be correct in both time and quality. There is always the risk of making great sacrifices and not getting the returns the athlete or team had hoped for. Additionally, what one athlete is required to do is not same as another, and within an athlete's personal development it will be required to spend more time in one area as opposed to another. All athletes have strengths and weaknesses. The key to reaching success is to showcase your strengths and develop your weaknesses.

Is it inevitable that sooner or later all athletes will fall short? It seems that eventually even the greatest athlete will reveal some failure of nerve, self-discipline, courage, insight, caution, or imagination. The end of any competition requires a breakdown or the giving in to one of these virtues or human limitations. These limitations are treated in the same way we deal with those that characterize thinkers, artists, and religious men. We tend to blame the failures on the individual, not on mankind, until we come to the point where we can confidently say that no one could have done better.

To reach the telos of human history would be to maximize human potential. However, human potential seems to grow as we move through history. Again very few athletes, if any, have ever truly given everything of themselves. Plato, in the *Republic* tells us that we could not possibly give everything to athletics because the body, which is subservient to the mind, tricks the mind into believing it can do no more or go no further. The mind in turn falsely advises us to stop as a method of protecting the physical body from over work long before we have reached our limits. This would lead us to conclude that no person can reach full potential. With this in mind, we can't possibly look at any athletic record as anything more than a momentary stop in history. Records show an outstanding instance in history, but fall short of full human potential.

In our times we have seen or been told of many great athletes. The greats, such as, Babe Ruth, Mohammed Ali, and Pele' or more recently, Michael Jordan, Joe Montana and Diego Maradona never reached full human or athletic potential. We have yet to see the record that won't be broken, the speed that won't be reached or the level of play that can't be achieved. The training methods of athletes, the equipment and even the contest themselves are ever-changing. *Paul Weiss wrote concerning athletic records:*

“At another time and on another occasion, a superior state or performance will perhaps be produced, thereby making clear that man’s final limits had not been reached before. This is a truth that will surely hold as long as men compete with one another... Should we ever arrive at some limit of speed, endurance, accuracy, etc., however, we will undoubtedly use it as an occasion for modifying the circumstances, and thus for challenging man anew.”

History gives evidence that no athlete or game will ever “maximize” human potential. However, we can inch closer to our own athletic potential by leaving the – comfort zone – that our mind settles for and working through an area that takes more time, effort, sacrifice and physical punishment. This generally unexplored area is the – uncomfortable zone – which the mind and body fight to stay clear of. This is where superior athletes must play.

The road to being a champion athlete is very difficult and traveled by very few. Long before any athlete can reach the stage of being a full-fledged champion they must prepare and sacrifice. Athletes have to discipline themselves, reorganize themselves and punish themselves. It’s hard not to ask, why would anyone want to be an athlete, once account is taken of what they must become and do to reach their goals? The answer is clear: young people are attracted to athletics because they offer the most promising means for becoming excellent. It is because an athlete has the potential to be exceptional, if only for a moment in time, that an athlete is a leader of humanity.

Dave de Hart,

- 30 years coaching experience
- 15 years - Head College Coach - NCAA
- 4 time college Coach of the Year
- Director of Athletics – University of the Ozarks
- State Director of Coaching – Nevada
- CYSA-North Instructional Staff – 13 years
- CYSA-North ODP Head Coach – 8 years
- Author – *Teaching and Understanding Soccer Goalkeeping*