
Why Your Next Hire Should Be an Athlete



By Antoine Tirard , (INSEAD MBA '97D), Founder, NexTalent and Claire Harbour , (INSEAD MBA '92J), Founder, Culture Pearl

Athletes who became business successes have passion, resilience and leadership skills. Lessons learned from sport can help in business.

Of course not every star athlete will make it in the corporate world; for every George Foreman or Michael Jordan there are hundreds of thousands of former sports players who fail to make the shift. But those who do, possess skills and personality traits as valuable to the boardroom as the playing field.

We recently conducted a study of athletes from diverse sports and nationalities who successfully made the move into the corporate world. The research identified some extraordinarily transferable skills, and individuals as dedicated to their new careers as to the sports which gave them their first taste of success.

Focus, networks and drive

Eric Brodnax, an Olympic equestrian from the U.S. Virgin Islands, set himself a clear agenda after leaving school. He identified high targets, specified time frames and focused exclusively on meeting them. His progression was spectacular, and he joined the team for the Pan-American Games in 1987, followed by the 1988 Olympics. However, with a 35th place at the Olympics, it was strikingly clear that he had not reached the threshold he had hoped for. At this point, he says, he recognised he was “good but not extraordinary” and it was time to act on his agenda and leave his sporting career behind him.

Being an Olympian opened doors and, although he was on his own once inside, he found that his background gave him the advantage of being able to create (and use) networks to the hilt. It also provided him with the ability to spot opportunities and run with them, an asset we found to be consistent across all the people we interviewed.

While completing an MBA at Wharton, Eric took a summer job working on privatisation strategies in the former Czechoslovakia, where his client list included the Slovak wine industry. His experiences prompted him to set up his own business importing wine from South Africa, at a time when the U.S. was lifting its economic sanctions.

Eric admits to loving the possibility of “contesting the field to win” and insists, “While I am not always looking for new or different challenges, I am definitely inspired by pursuing to its logical end whatever I undertake.”

Adaptability, passion and resilience

Andrew Noble from the British ski team, had his first test of resilience at the age of 15 when he broke his back. The recovery period was long and trying for Andrew, who at that stage was competing at extremely high levels. The time out gave him the opportunity to reflect and he returned to the ski fields even more determined to push to ever greater levels.

Shortly after this he was given the opportunity to go pro and, as he climbed the rankings, he started to make money from the sponsorships and product endorsements that went with his place on the U.K. team. In the build-up to the 2010 Olympics, Andrew’s qualities as a team player and a natural leader were called upon in a way he would never have expected. Four weeks before the opening ceremony it was announced that the British Ski Federation had gone bankrupt, and there would be no further support, either

financial or logistical.

As a natural action-taker and motivator, Andrew contacted sponsors and logistics suppliers, in the hope of rescuing something from the situation. This called on every resource he had, including a high resistance to pressure. This clarity of mind was useful not only then, but also in his future career at the notoriously competitive strategy consultancy, McKinsey.

Another advantage that Andrew feels he has brought with him from sport is his ability to create and build significant relationships. He believes he is more experienced and effective than his peers in this area, and finds it easy to develop rapport with clients.

10 Transferable Skills Athletes Bring to the Corporate Table

1. Speed, energy and dynamism
2. Self-Motivation, reliable autonomous performance
3. Focus, discipline and dedication
4. Passion and determination
5. Flexibility and adaptability
6. High resistance to pressure, resilience
7. Strategic planning
8. Pioneering spirit, ability to spot opportunities
9. Teamwork and collaboration
10. Relationship building and networking

Overcoming challenges

But transitioning out of sport is not always smooth sailing. And with little help available from the sports industry, corporations may find they need to be aware of the potential problems and prepared to assist their sporting recruits in reaching their full potential.

By the time John Garrett went to Cambridge University, he was already a national champion rower at schoolboy level, and had experienced different racing conditions all over Europe. By his second year at Cambridge, he was a member of the British team. His rise was swift and he says it was this momentum which helped him grasp at every new opportunity.

John went on to combine a career, first in the city for a merchant bank and then in the civil service while training full-time for the national squad. When increased sponsorship for the team became available, he made rowing the priority, combining it with postgraduate study in economics, leading to a Masters' degree at the London School of Economics (LSE). The Economics degree sparked an interest in international development issues, especially international debt, so it was a natural step to change direction after a "less successful" third Olympics. He moved away from rowing and into more "serious work".

John had no difficulty finding various roles, in small business, local and central government and eventually international development, but the switch was tough, both emotionally and psychologically. He missed the excitement and "special" nature of travelling internationally to compete in sporting events and, like others before him, he had difficulty relating to his new identity.

Curbing a competitive nature

Kavitha Krishnamurthy was a four times Canadian junior tennis champion before "going pro". After completing an MBA at INSEAD she went to work for Coca-Cola where the discipline, equanimity and global adaptability developed during her years on the tennis circuit, were put to good use. One potential liability she noted, however, was the difficulty some sports stars have in modifying their competitive nature. Fostering a team environment that is conducive to success is not necessarily compatible with an athlete's desire to win at all costs.

Benefits of shared skills and synergies

As we conducted our discussions with former athletes in the corporate world we found clear patterns in their stories, and many examples of how nature and nurture come into play to create exceptional leaders. What is very obvious is that there is a collection of transferable competencies that athletes develop in greater proportion compared to their more sedentary peers. If these are put to good use by the companies they join, they can rapidly develop into extraordinarily successful assets.

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For more on our in-depth interviews with former athletes who transitioned to business, read the extended version of this post on [NexTalent](#).

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