

MATT DIXON

# CHARACTERISTICS OF ELITE PERFORMANCE

One of the most interesting features of our sport is the accessibility of the professionals to the large field of amateurs that also enjoy triathlon. There are not many sports where the top professionals are so accessible before, during and following competition, often racing on the same course at the same time. This has led to massive familiarity and connection between the elite and the amateurs, increasing the hope of many aspiring amateurs who long for membership in the sport's highest ranks. What are the key characteristics, or the thought processes, that exist in nearly all great performers whether they are triathletes, executives or musicians? *Triathlete Europe's* resident coach, Matt Dixon, looks deeper into these characteristics to help you become a better athlete.

**A**t purplepatch I am lucky enough to not only work with some of the elite performers in the sport, but also some of the top performers in the business world, and am continually intrigued by the parallels in personal characteristics between the two sets of high achievers. These people that excel in their own disciplines provide a wonderful opportunity for not only inspiration, but for your learning on how to find your own optimal performance. Some of the characteristics are challenging to learn or implement, but understanding them and aiming to implement them can have drastic effects on you evolving in the optimal path toward improved performance.



## TO GET TO THE TOP

The primary focus of this feature is to identify the characteristics that are common in many of the elite performers that I have observed, coached or followed. This should enable you to assess your approach to training, or other things in life for that matter, and help guide your own performance gains. Before we delve into these points, I feel it would be a mistake not to establish a foundation of thought relating to what it takes to excel in any endeavour, such as getting to, and staying at, the top of a sport.

To rise to the top, and stay at the top, of the sport takes a tremendous amount of sacrifice, hard work and commitment. It does not happen overnight, but is a continual journey that is always filled with a deep level of commitment and drive. As I review all the characteristics below, you should remember that all of our sports top performers have decided to make an almost unbelievable level of commitment to excellence, and while they all have a genetic predisposition for their level of performance, it is the drive and



commitment that has allowed them to step out from good to great.

This commitment can come in many forms, not just in training hard, but where the athlete is based, who they surround themselves with, how they manage the financial challenges and the list goes on. It is not an easy journey and not one that many have the real capacity for, it also one that has easier routes to success. There is no 'getting lucky' in arriving and staying at elite performance.

Not many are designed for elite athlete performance, that is why it is called elite, but you can mostly certainly learn from these great performers. The lessons can extend well beyond sport and, in fact, as you read through the characteristics of elite performance, I challenge you to go back to the top and read again, but this time imagine that you are looking through the lens of business performance. Surely a highly successful business executive has little in common with the elite athlete?

An elite athlete may exist in a very different arena but the two are not as different as you may think. In fact, if you consider some of the key characteristics and traits that the elite athlete displays while separating themselves from their competition, it could well strike you as remarkably similar to an executive's skill set. These traits, that promote fantastic athletic accomplishment, are strikingly similar to the traits and methods that you use (or should be using!) in your athletic performance, and even at work.>



## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ELITE PERFORMER

As much as I dislike features that present ‘10 tips to a better...’, or ‘five ways to improve...’, I am going to go ahead and outline 10 characteristics that, I believe, are common mechanisms and features of elite performers. They exhibit themselves in various ways with the rich mix of personalities out there, but are often central to the make up.

### 1. Goal Orientated

Let’s start with an obvious but worthy characteristic. Every elite has firmly established and measurable long-term goals with shorter-term goals to provide the essential stepping-stones of success. An athlete’s career goals are often planned for years in advance, requiring short-term bridges toward these goals. The journey is seldom an accident but one which is planned well in advance, and the goals are continually revisited and assessed, not just put on a piece of paper and locked in a drawer. These goals help create the framework or roadmap of an athletes career.

### 2. Assessment

No athlete can consistently achieve success without a continuous cycle of

assessment. This process allows the athlete to stay on track and can act as a roadmap of success. Ignoring this critical element can lead to disastrous consequences and no ability to understand where they went wrong. An elite performer understands the need for assessment in both good and bad performance, and places great value in its importance. The value of assessment is, of course, greatly enhanced with a strong and established set of goals and a roadmap, allowing a loop of feedback and evolution.

### 3. Support

Behind every successful athlete it is common to have a team of people that facilitate success. The smart elite understands their own strengths and weaknesses and is willing to utilise a network, or team, of people that work toward a shared vision or goal. This is often a key role of a coach, but can also include other key players that help the performer excel, including partners, mentors and experts of specific fields. Elite performers do not try to have every answer themselves, but will often look outside to gather guidance, support and define their vision.

### 4. Specificity

The best athletes have great instinct to be able to focus on the important factors that

will lead them toward their goals. This targeted approach enables them to ignore variables that can impede progress, act as a distraction from their mission, or are out of their control. It often takes time and experience to develop the full recipe that works specifically for them, but elite performers have a keen predisposition to narrow their focus and attention on what is specific and important to them. Those who are talented but easily distracted often find themselves pulled in many directions, and seldom find the right path for themselves. That issue often results in continual cycles of failure.

### 5. Resistance to Adversity

Elite athletes tend to thrive in stressful situations (despite the fact they also feel the same nerves and anxiety as the rest of us!) and do not panic when plans go wrong. They remain solution-based and tend to focus on controllable factors that they are able to influence. Adaptability and resilience is key for athletic success. This is displayed in multiple levels in our sport such as following poor training sessions or races, inevitable curveballs that occur in race situations or when entire seasons don’t go as planned. The failures are often the place where the most important lessons are learned, but only

if the athlete is able and willing to actually learn from them. And this is less common than you might imagine.

### 6. Balance

In the journey toward success there is bound to be peak peaks and valleys of success and failure. A great athlete will not be too distraught at a short-term failure, but equally will not be over excited by short-term success. Emotional homeostasis, or balance, creates less distraction and a higher likelihood of staying on track toward the long-term goals. It is obviously critical to enjoy success, and celebrate victory, but this peak is often followed with a return to the journey and roadmap, and is viewed as a stepping-stone to continued success. This should be balanced with a poor result allowing learning, but is not strong enough to completely derail the journey, and call for a change in direction.

### 7. Patience

I should add resilience to this characteristic but every elite performance values and understands that the journey to excellence is not an overnight one. The ability to set the path of progression and stay on it, not just through one season but for multiple seasons, to shine with the best. Underpinning the patience is often a fundamental belief that the patience will allow progression to a level of performance that can hardly be imagined at the start of the journey. To shift from average to great takes time, in fact multiple established elite performers in business and life have often looked back and quoted, 'it takes 10 years to be great at anything'.

### 8. Passion

If the above rings true, it is close to impossible to excel without passion. This is a passion for the goal, the journey and for the whole endeavour. Passion does not diminish the challenge, but it does enhance the enjoyment and commitment to that challenge. The passion of the elite will shine through, not only through words but the actions they take in daily life toward the goal. If the passion is not there, the performance will never shine, or at least not continue to shine for long.

### 9. Risks

This trait is very difficult to train into someone, but the willingness to take smart and calculated risks are essential for optimal results. Channelled correctly with a logical approach calculated risks can lead to great results, but the athlete must be willing to expose themselves without fear of consequence. This is often the foundation of



the X-factor in performance, with a willingness to truly be exposed in front of one's peers without a fear of consequence. Do not mistake this with being wild or carefree, elite performers know when to take risks and how to channel them toward better performance.

### 10. Recovery

Ultimately, this may be the magical lesson that we can all learn from. Nearly anyone can train hard, but the truly gifted are the ones that understand how to recover and allow the performance to come out. Recovery is central to every training programme I create for the elite, and the best performers understand its value in finding their best results. This value and understanding does not diminish the hard work, it does not make the journey easier, and is certainly not a short cut to

performance, but it does help maintain health and create the runway for massive gains. Anyone can train hard but only the best know how to balance it with recovery for optimal gains.

We are not all destined to become professional athletes. That honour is reserved for those with both natural talent, and the ability and desire to make the massive commitment and sacrifice toward the goal. We can learn from those at the top of their game regardless of whether they are triathletes or not. We can also extract some of the characteristics that facilitate elite performance and apply the lessons for our own performance gains. We can all strive for elite performance in our own sport, work, or even life. It is not easy but simpler than you may think. 🏃