

# Study shows attitude makes a champion

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Elite performers expressed an internal drive and commitment to their sports.  
Credit: Dave Collins

On the path to greatness, why do some become champions while others fall short? Coaches, parents, and aspiring athletes have all sought to answer this question. In their search for the optimal path to greatness, some believe that the path should be smoothed of all obstacles, while others say that such challenges are instrumental to talent development. Now, a recent study suggests that what really distinguishes champions is how they face and overcome such obstacles.

"We've found that there are universal psychological characteristics amongst those who are aspiring to get to the top," says Professor Dave Collins, lead author of the study, as well as Chair and Director of the Institute of Coaching and Performance at the University of Central Lancashire. "We have a good idea of what makes people excellent and how we can help them reach peak performance."

By interviewing athletes from varied sports such as soccer, rowing, skiing, and combat sports, Collins and his collaborators sought to find distinguishing characteristics between the best of the best, the good, and those that didn't quite make the cut. For each participant, they collected information about career trajectory, perceived challenges and the participant's reactions to such obstacles. Interview questions also explored participants' commitment to their sports and their interactions with coaches and families.

The results showed that elite performers expressed an internal drive and commitment to their sports that their "almost" great colleagues lacked. The elite approached training with a "never satisfied" attitude, whereas "almosts" might avoid challenging training exercises. Following an injury

or a failure to perform, high performers were determined to get back to their sports, stronger than ever. Low achievers, on the other hand, often expressed surprise at their failures, telling how they lost enthusiasm after such incidents.



Elite athletes approached training with a "never satisfied" attitude. Credit: Dave Collins

Despite these differences in the athletes' attitudes, there was surprisingly little variation in the nature or number of the challenges themselves. All had roughly comparable traumatic incidences during their careers. More than the challenges themselves, the differences came down to how the athletes reacted to these obstacles and the champions' positive, "learn from it" attitudes.

"From our research, we're assembling a set of rules to guide what a coach should be doing and what skills an athlete should end up with," says Collins. "Furthermore, these characteristics hold true for other fields as well, from [sports](#) to music to any environment."

While challenge may be integral on the path to success, this research suggests that challenge is not sufficient in itself. An aspiring athlete's attitude towards challenge is what most distinguishes the champions from the rest.

The article is published in the open-access journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

**More information:** Dave Collins et al, Super Champions, Champions, and Almosts: Important Differences and Commonalities on the Rocky Road, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.02009](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.02009)

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