



The winning formula

Former Olympic champion **MICHAEL JOHNSON** on why some British athletes lack the key qualities needed to make it to the very top

What does it take to win an Olympic gold medal? A combination of talent, dedication, commitment, mental strength and well-structured goals. I understand that from my own experience as an Olympic athlete, from training elite athletes at my Performance Centre in Texas and from speaking to champions such as Usain Bolt, Ian Thorpe and Sir Steve Redgrave.

Do I see these qualities in British athletes today? No, on the whole, I don't. A few do have what it takes. Sir Chris Hoy and Rebecca Adlington are both great athletes: hard-working, dedicated and mentally tough. But there are a lot of athletes in Britain who aren't reaching their potential.

> Attitude adjustment

A lot of it comes down to attitude. How badly do you want it? Jessica Ennis wants it, and she goes and gets it done in the heptathlon. Phillips Idowu was a triple jump silver medallist in Beijing in 2008, but he wasn't happy. Others would be celebrating. Phillips wasn't thrilled. He felt like he had lost gold, not like he had won silver. That's the attitude you need to be the best.

But you also have to look at the system in Britain. The big problems for UK athletics are a sense of complacency and a worrying habit of rewarding mediocrity. Yes, athletes need support so they can help themselves, with all the coaches and facilities they need. But it's dangerous if you create a system that suggests mediocrity is OK. You should only get these tools if you're willing to use them. They are there to help you improve, not stand still.

> The modern athlete

Today's athletes need more assistance from a mental perspective. That includes coping with pressure from the media, but also encouraging them to not settle for anything other than being world-class. In the UK, everyone is so desperate to find the next big thing that athletes with a hint of potential are presented as superstars, with big contracts and



'A few British athletes have what it takes but a lot aren't reaching their potential'

sponsorships. Instead of improving and questioning themselves, they feel a sense of entitlement. It's a media and institutional problem. Sally Gunnell said she trained in fear every day - a fear of losing. Seb Coe said he enjoyed criticism. It gave him the desire to improve. Fear and criticism can be good.

Modern athletes have more distractions than in my era, with Facebook and Twitter. The system doesn't take that into account so mental training is much more significant. Athletes need the ability to focus and avoid distractions. I noticed British 400m runner Martyn Rooney tweeted straight after a race once, so I said to him, 'Stop tweeting and concentrate on the job'.

> Quality control

The most important quality for an Olympic champion is an ability to understand yourself and know your strengths and weaknesses. I had to be brutally honest with myself about my weaknesses. Not just talent-wise, but also my willpower and motivation. Today, athletes are quick to blame others or coaches. To fulfil

your potential, you need a goal and an understanding of what it will take to achieve it. You might want to win an Olympic gold medal, but are you ready to commit to that work?

> Percentage gains

Ultimately, it's about chasing those extra percentages that make an athlete world-class. They require improvements in every component of your performance - speed, strength, flexibility, nutrition, technique, mental toughness, even the visualisation of the race to improve your preparation. Ask yourself in the mirror: do you want to be good or do you want to be the best? **MF**

Michael Johnson's training philosophy

Reach your potential with these tips from one of sport's greats



Make time

Aim for consistency. Regular training is best so make sure you can perform consistently at one level before moving up.



Achievable aims

Set yourself a goal and break it down into achievable targets so you can monitor your progress.



Fuel your progress

Nutrition is the toughest part for some people, but don't over think it. Eat healthily, but give yourself room or you will feel unhappy and guilty.



Be sport-specific

Train for your sport. For example, to make sprints in a football match, you need to do interval training to encourage your body to adapt.



See success

Visualising your performance - imagining your kit, the terrain, the weather - will stop you being crushed by nerves on the big day.

Gold Rush by Michael Johnson is out now

