



DNA, Pune – 6th June 2009

The hunger for excellence sets them apart

Champions have the self-discipline to learn skills and apply them consistently, in the face of hurdles

K Jayshankar



What does it take to become a champion? While a lot of research has gone into finding out, various conclusions abound and we can safely say that champions are made, while only a few geniuses are born.

Prodigies are by definition rare. Sachin Tendulkar, Bobby Fischer, Tiger Woods, Lance Armstrong are some rare individuals who have made a mark in their respective fields and stamped their genius indelibly. However, the vast number of champions have been created through sheer 'blood, sweat and tears'. Take, for instance, the sporting icon Michael

Phelps. How many years did it take for him to reach the Olympic pinnacle of an astonishing eight gold medals? As many as 12 years and more!

The Phelps story involved moving from Baltimore to Ann Arbor, Michigan, following his coach Bob Bowman. Bowman crafted the supreme athlete over years of training and few may be aware that at Phelps' first Olympics (Sydney, 2000) he did not win any medal. But the coach knew that he had not finished polishing the diamond. The journey continued and Phelps won six gold medals at Athens (2004) before he finally reached an all-time landmark in Beijing (2008).

His great rival, the Australian Ian 'Thorpedo' Thorpe was reported to have disclosed that on his retirement he misses 'pain', that pure, undiluted feeling known mostly to the great athlete. He spoke about how he would push his body so hard, so far, so long that he had to halt and vomit on the side of the pool. "I miss pushing myself to the point where it almost brings you to tears," he said. How many can claim to be that hungry for excellence?

Denis Waitley, the famous motivation coach offered us the formula for success: $P = S \times D$; Performance = Skills x Discipline. Well, that's easy to remember. However, the crux of the matter is: how many have the self-discipline to learn skills and apply them consistently, in the face of hurdles. Truly, persistence is an under-valued attribute. So, this deep and insane desire to be the champion is not everybody's quest. Among the unknown champions in India, the case of Malli Mastan Babu is not prominent enough to be known to lay people as mountaineering is not an Olympic sport. The legendary climber, George Mallory responded to the question 'Why do you want to climb Everest?' by saying 'Because it is there'. Malli too was lured by the call of the mountains in his college days and hungrily set out to do what others had never attempted before. He achieved his 'Olympic goal' by becoming the fastest in the world to climb the seven summits in 2006, besides becoming the first Indian to achieve glory and create a world record by climbing the highest summit in every continent in 172 days. His achievement: January 2006: Mount Vinson Massif, Antarctica (16,067 ft); February 2006: Mount Aconcagua, South America (22,841 ft); March 2006: Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa (19,341ft); April 2006: Mount Kosciuszko, Australia (7,310 ft); May 2006: Mount Everest, Asia, (29,035 ft); June 2006: Mount Elbrus, Europe (18,511 ft); July 2006: Mount Denali, North America (20,035 ft).

However, champions are never satisfied. They set Herculean targets and believe that they can achieve while others wonder at the madness of it all. But then, not all of us are champions!

