



What can we learn from high-performance sport?

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At a recent conference, someone asked me a great but simple question: "What is high performance?" In the medical profession, just like in professional sport, it's about safety, exceptional performance and successful outcomes. High performance is not just finishing the race by applying the basics well. It's also about improving the precision, performance and focus required to increase efficiency, improve success, and keep things error-free.

Here are the four areas high-performance athletes excel at.

Energy management: Just like for athletes, this is a doctor's number one currency.

Doctors and surgeons manage a variety of patients, diagnoses, and long days of focused attention. A surgeon also needs stamina, precision and focus, and has to manage a team with multiple and complex surgeries.

It starts with applying the four high-performance fundamentals: exercise daily; fuel your body with the right food; free your mind; and recover with purpose.

In sport, high-performance athletes are meticulous in their approach to energy management. They schedule their energy and recovery on a daily, weekly, monthly, yearly and career basis to sustain high performance and inner drive.

Mindset: High performers are known for their productivity, precision, drive and focus.

It starts with a clarity of vision. When Michael Phelps was 12 years old, he visualised standing on the Olympic podium with a gold medal around his neck. As a 19-year-old, at Athens in 2004, Phelps won six gold and two bronze.

When you have clarity of vision, you say no instead of yes – to everything that will prevent you from achieving your goal. No to chocolate, alcohol and late nights. You naturally form a disciplined mind. Complacency and lack of drive lead to errors and mistakes. So, what's your vision?

A disciplined mind also needs both focus and adaptability. Every patient provides a different set of conditions. It's like a Tour de France rider dealing with changing terrain, road surfaces and weather conditions.

What can you control? How can you provide a safe and error-free environment? As a triathlete and cyclist, I always ensured my equipment was maintained – because a tyre blowout, faulty brake, loose pedal or a dry chain could be catastrophic.

Teamwork: In medicine, this can be a matter of life or death.

Like a Formula 1 pitstop crew, how can you work as a single unit to perform a complex task under pressure with minimal error? Meticulous planning, checklists, tight feedback loops, practice and communication are required.

I was fortunate to be part of one of New Zealand's best sports teams in the '90s – the Stratford Premiere Men's Field Hockey Team – who went unbeaten for 272 games. That's right, 16 years without a loss. It might be a world record unbeaten sports streak. What's even more impressive is that the team only lost once in 21 years.

To deliver sustainable high performance over a long period of time, this team had to incorporate the following:

1. **Vision:** Having a positive vision based around quality of performance and a minimum level the team would accept.
2. **Eco-system vs Ego-system:** Team mindset focused on lifting both self-worth and the collective worth of the team.
3. **Discipline:** Knowing your role; and when to lead and when to follow.
4. **Unity:** Creating permission to feel the courage to have honest conversations promptly and quickly.

Performance monitoring: The biggest difference between sport and medicine is the level of performance monitoring.

High-performance athletes apply a tight feedback loop to their performance. Always focused on how they can receive high-quality feedback in real time, they know that constant growth minimises success or failure. No successful athlete does it on their own. They surround themselves with people and technology that can monitor, tweak and enhance their performance.

Good doctors need high-performance mindsets to succeed – for their own quality of life and state of mind, as well as their patients' wellbeing. ■