

## GAME OF LIFE: LEARNINGS FROM SPORTS FOR PROFESSIONALS

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### ABSTRACT

What do sporting champions do? How is an invincible team like Manchester United born? What makes winning teams click? Why do some teams keep on losing whereas a few teams snap the losing streak and get back to the habit of winning? How players like Sachin Tendulkar are made, who have the ability to carry the hopes of the entire nation on his shoulders? This paper attempts to unravel all the mysteries. It digs deep into different sporting examples, analyzes interviews from several sporting greats, investigates the workings of champion teams and provides a solid learning curve to the professionals who wish to make it big in their own fields. Contrary to popular perception, ability is not the sole distinguishing factor for success. But the blend of ability with the right attitude and passion creates a champion. This universal formula for winning is explored in this paper along with its relevance in our lives, the lives of each and everyone who strive to succeed.

**KEYWORDS:** Sporting Champions, Professionals, Ability, Universal Formula for Winning

### INTRODUCTION

Television, the greatest ally of sport, creates dramatic images of adrenalin-fuelled athletes making a courageous, even frantic race towards victory. There are a few sights more moving than victory, or brave defeat, or indeed a heroic effort. Anil Kumble bowling with a broken jaw to steer his team to victory in Antigua in 2002, or Sachin Tendulkar braving the sandstorm and the opposition in Sharjah in 1998 or tears streaming down David Beckham's cheeks when he bids adieu to the world of football- these acts have inspired thousands and still continue to do so. There are few things in life more inspiring and motivating than sport itself.

### Foreword - The Business of Winning

Winning and losing are no more than a step in a much longer journey; a crucial step but just one step only. Those who journey better, take that step better, far more easily. Those who flounder and lose their way in between may reach the finishing line, but in all likelihood with someone ahead of them. In this study, the way to win is discussed minutely. Right from setting up goals to maintaining that winning aura- all the essential principles of victory have been elucidated here through examples from the fascinating world of real life champions.

### Goals

“Never tell me sky is the limit, when there are footprints on the moon” - Anonymous

When one sets out on a journey, he dreams of achieving something, something big. But that stays in the realm of dreams. To make those dreams real, there should be a deadline on our dreams. From that very moment dreams become

goals; goals that cause an individual as well as teams to dig deeper, extract just that little more out of oneself and launch him out of his comfort zone.

The goals set has to be out of reach, but never out of sight. When a child prodigy by the name of Sachin Tendulkar first stepped out to play for India, he never set a goal to be the best player of Indian Cricket. He wanted to play as many matches for India, and score as many runs as possible- a goal which was very much manageable for him.

This also teaches us that larger goals should always be replaced by a series of short term goals. When South African Cricket Team chased 434 runs in 50 overs against Australia, they did not start the chase keeping 434 in mind. The first 10 overs were played with the aim of not losing a wicket and score 80 runs, whereas the next 15 were played with the aim to score 120 runs. Breaking the seemingly impossible target into smaller ones ultimately allowed the South Africans to win the match with quite ease.

But there is a flip side to it. Goals can overwhelm. An immediate goal appears to be so daunting that teams or individuals run the risk of giving up even before the effort begins. So, it is always better to replace result goals with performance goals. Setting performance goals removes the anxiety of the result and allows the individual to perform freely. For instance a swimmer competing in the Olympics always looks to emulate his best time- because that is something which is in his control. He does not look to win the gold at the very instant, as the timings of other participants are not in his hand. It can be very well surmised that setting up of performance goals and achieving them one after another ultimately results in achieving the desired result. It's a philosophy shared by the maestro of chess Vishwanathan Anand. He confessed "I just turn up at tournaments and play my chess and see what happens. I don't see the point of speculating and planning too much"

Thus this is the first and foremost step towards winning - setting up goals and working diligently & faithfully to achieve them.

## **Change**

"It is not the strongest of species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change"

Change is not an enemy, it is merely a challenge to a set way of doing things, a compulsion to get out of our comfort zones and go into unfamiliar territory. Change is everywhere around us. In this helter - skelter world technologies become obsolete quickly, businesses perish rapidly and people become redundant. It's a scary phenomenon and one has to adapt as quickly as possible. As for example in sporting world the old Test Cricket is slowly gives way to T-20 cricket, and in football the rules undergo a sea change to protect the strikers.

Instead of resistance, adaptability is the key to survive this period of transition. Legendary test cricket bowlers like Anil Kumble found out that in T-20 cricket, it was not about bowling a containing spell anymore but he had to search for wickets each and every ball.

Even in the professional field, as one climbs up the he finds out that job responsibilities change and new skill set needs to be added every now and then. People need to adapt to and excel at the ever changing world around him. Vishwanathan Anand ably sums it up by his words "You have to ride those changes, new approaches, and new ways of playing the game. You have to be enthusiastic and keen to learn"

## THE WINNING TRIANGLE-ABILITY, ATTITUDE AND PASSION

“If you only ever give 90 percent in training then you will ever give 90 percent when it matters” - Michael Owen

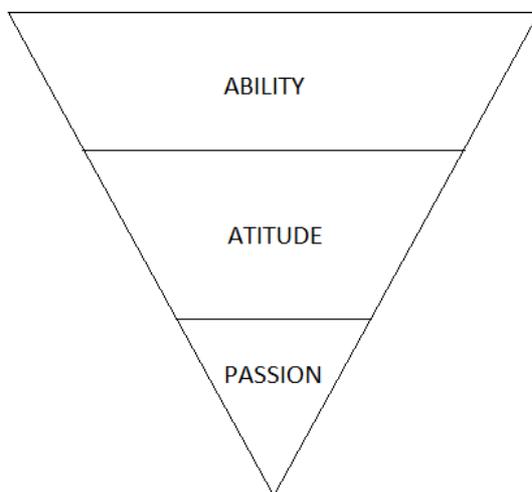
Winning is not a destination in itself but a series of destinations where fresh challenges are encountered and overcome along the way. Not everybody can do it, for winning can also be exhausting and that is where the true champions stand apart. These are people who not only conquer the opposition but also conquer themselves, since winning brings with it its own sets of challenges. That is why Tendulkar and Warne, Sampras and Federer, Pele and Maradona are remembered as legends.

The talent of these great players is widely known. But talent alone is not enough. The great players marry their extraordinary talent to something far more powerful, far more critical to their success. They are possessed of a wonderful attitude, a work ethic that causes them to chisel away at their craft, removing one rough edge after another till the polished diamond surfaces. Tiger Woods worked 16 hours a day to perfect his swing, whereas Abhinav Bindra, the first Olympic gold medalist from India practically lived his youth at the shooting range cut off from the outside world.

This attitude causes the champions to dig deep when the going gets tough and get out of the adverse situation. Sometimes when the first serve does not really work, the leg glance just does not happen, the champions will scrape, nudging here and there for a run or just block for long periods. When the going gets tough it just does not matter how beautiful our game looks. The only matter of importance is how the adverse situation is handled to bring it into our favor. Everybody looks good when they are on the top of their game but as Martina Navratilova once said “What matters is how well you play when you are playing badly”.

Finally there are a few who make it to the very top. Sergei Bubka, Vishwanathan Anand, Michael Schumacher reigned supreme in such a manner that they were synonymous with the sport they played. They had the passion to perform. They were in complete love with what they did. Their passion, focus and obsession with the game made them stand out as best among the best.

There is a lesson there. We too can be the Tendulkars and Anands of our profession. But to achieve that ability or skill is not the sole factor. Skills can be taught, attitude can't and at the very top is passion, an extraordinary drive where success and joy come for win after win.



**Figure 1: The Winning Triangle**

## Learning While Losing

“I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”- Michael Jordan

Bookstores are well stocked with success stories about Google, Yahoo, Coke or Nike. There are lots of pages on what Sir Alex Ferguson did to create Manchester United or how Infosys became a global brand. This always creates the illusion that only the victor can tell us something worthwhile. But it is never so. Those wounded and vanquished in warfare not only have scars to display but with each scar comes a story and a lesson: of what not to do, of errors of judgment, of horrible setbacks that can actually destroy competent teams. This is what failure teaches us, it tells us where we can be fallible, allows us to tighten our game and subsequently improve our career. Every successful man has failed, not once but several times, in their life, but they analyzed the things in real perspective and tried again with more vigor and zeal and got success. Failures should not be allowed to create frustration, desperateness or disappointment; instead failure should be taken as a boon which gives the strength to fight back with fierce fortitude and invincible zeal.

Not only individuals but teams around the world get into a slump. Too much dependence on a single star is a big factor. This happened with the Indian Cricket Team of the 90’s. They were over dependent on Sachin Tendulkar to bail them out of each and every match. And hence, they lost more than they won. Also, another big reason of team failure all around is the teams get stuck in their past glories so much that they fail to see the world changing around them. The Indian Hockey team, winner of 8 Olympic gold medals, was so engrossed in their past performance that they failed to see that the new playing surface was the AstroTurf whereas they still played in grass fields.

Failure is not the end of the road but merely a stepping stone to future glory. When teams or individuals cannot escape the losing streak, they need to be patient, celebrate even small achievements and perhaps have a change of guard. Manchester City, a mid-table English Premier League went through a take-over by the Sheikh family, brought in world class players, waited patiently for two years to build a team and now they are a force to reckon with. Another glaring example of rising from the ashes is former India captain Sourav Ganguly. When Sourav was unceremoniously dropped from Indian Cricket Team, he did not quit. But merely took it as a challenge to master one of the finest comebacks in world sport. He worked on his drawbacks, grinded hard and came back an even better player.

Failure has an outstanding quality. It separates the champions from the also-rans. It actually tests the mettle of the competitor. When an individual has failed once, his inherent nature makes him think he is going to fail again. And very soon he falls into a losing streak. Champions are those individuals who come out of this streak, they let go of the past and not let the past influence his present at all. Each day, and each moment can be considered as a new beginning if one has the heart to do so. Sachin Tendulkar again was a prime example of this. On numerous occasions he failed, got out for a duck, and could not bail his team out of trouble. But according to his own admission “Every ball faced is ball one “. He never let the past haunt his present. And hence, he succeeded more often than he failed and slowly but surely grew to be the greatest cricketer India has ever had.

Thus, failure is an invaluable teacher. It is like the potholes on the road that needs to be avoided. And winning is not about not making mistakes, not failing, but about how to learn from them and become wiser and stronger. It’s not about getting knocked down but how fast you can get up and fight again.

## The Burden of Winning

“Success is a lousy teacher, it seduces smart people into thinking they can’t lose” - Bill Gates

The buzz in the dressing room, that electrifying feeling, team bonding at its highest, confidence to take on the world, abundance of resources - the fruits of victory are many and varied. But like all good things, victory comes with a pitfall. Quite often victory is said to be associated with three perils- ego, over confidence and complacency. We often see talented young cricketers bursting onto the stage, having a great IPL season and then subsequently fading away from the scene. Practice sessions in the nets give way to brand endorsements and ribbon cuttings. The urge to win makes us do the impossible. When Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi were at their prime, Goran Ivanisavic, a relatively unknown Croatian stunned them and went on to win the Wimbledon. But, later on, he did not win a single championship ever. This is what a victory does- creates a false blanket of comfort until it is ripped off one fine morning.

So, it is of paramount importance that we analyze our victories in the same vein as we analyze our defeats. We learn what the formula that led us to success was. A victor is always analyzed by his competitors ruthlessly. Henceforth, it becomes quite essential for the individual or the team to work even harder, innovate newer ways to success, be a step ahead of the opponents all the time. Brett Lee, a member of 2003 world champion Australian cricket team, said that even after winning the world cup they trained as if they were no. 2 in the world. This urgency, this focus prompted Australia to rule world cricket for a long period of time.

A lesson is learnt here - Winning is brilliant, worth dreaming about, but only sustainable if our eyes are never taken off the ball.

## **THE WINNING AURA**

The last, but not the least is the topic worth discussing- the champion's aura. His body language, an indomitable swagger, all bears the markings of a successful person. When Vivian Richards walked out onto the field it seemed that he would murder his opponents just by staring at them. In Ice Hockey, the 90's Soviets team had acquired such a reputation that scoring one goal against them was considered to be a huge achievement.

This is worth replicating. Sometimes, when the odds are heavily stacked against us, we need to tackle the opposition head on. Meeting eye to eye, maintaining the swagger, and believing in the competition- it makes all the difference between losing and carving out an improbable victory.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Sport teaches us the importance of a healthy mind and body, the value of discipline and work ethic. To stay ahead one needs to stay relevant first. In a dynamic environment this means continuous improvement. In this age of ever changing technologies and processes innovation has to be an integral part of work culture and efforts should be put to do the same things more efficiently. This study of sports just reiterates the fact that combination of ability with right attitude and passion leads to stupendous success. When one commits to excellence, success has to follow.

## **FUTURE SCOPE**

This study is basically the influence of sports on the individual. The scope of this study can be extended to determine the effect of sports on teams or corporations like big business organizations, media houses and many more. Also the leadership factor has been largely left unexplored here, which can be subsequently discussed in the future endeavors.

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