

# MIND GAMES

Ask anyone who's enjoyed sustained success and they'll agree that it takes a strong mind to get there, and to stay there. But when it comes to winning through physical prowess, is it more brain or brawn? And what lessons can those in business take from top athletes? **WORDS** | LISA KEMPTHORNE



Imagine swimming, cycling and running a combined distance of 500km a week. Most of us would be lucky to nail that in a month (or a year...), but it's exactly what Perth triathlete and three-time world champion Peter Robertson does. And he says training is the easy part of his job.

To echo the sentiments of cycling hero Lance Armstrong, "it's not about the bike". It's not about the wetsuit buoyancy or the light-as-a-feather racing flats either (although they all help the cause). According to Peter, the difference between himself and the men who came second in 2001, 2003 and 2005, is that Peter knew, without a shadow of doubt, he would be world champion.

On a massage table in 1994 and only 12 months into his training for triathlon, Peter Robertson's masseur told him he would go to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. At only 18 years old, with no swimming talent to speak of but a strong running background, Peter had total belief that with some hard training this would become a reality. And indeed it did, Peter competing at the Sydney and Athens Games, and narrowly missing out on selection for Beijing. More recently, he won bronze at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne behind fellow Australian Brad Kahlefeldt and New Zealander Bevan Docherty. He has now refocused on competing in the lucrative US triathlon scene.

"You can say you want to do something, or you think you can do it – but when you know you can do it, that's how you excel," says Peter. "I think that's the biggest hurdle to overcome, is believing in yourself."

The careful construction of self-belief takes Peter months to achieve, built on a foundation of training, recovery, a positive environment and nutrition. Ensuring these factors are all played out to suit his body perfectly gives Peter the confidence come race day that he will be better prepared than other competitors.

West Australian Institute of Sport psychologist Matthew Burgin has seen many extremely talented athletes achieve varying levels of success. He believes Peter displays some unique personal characteristics that only a very few highly successful elite athletes possess.

"Robbo is fantastic at living it out," says Matthew. "Whatever is meant to contribute to being an elite athlete, he does it. He knows what creates success and then he lives it on a daily basis."

Matthew draws parallels from Peter's mindset with Perth swimming champion Eamon Sullivan, current 50m freestyle world record holder.

"I've seen similar characteristics in Eamon, they both research their craft," says Matthew. "They know what it means to be a 100 or 50m sprinter or the best triathlete in the world, they take a

moment to create a methodology they think will create success in their environment and then they believe in it. They execute it without compromise and make it happen."

With the knowledge he would eventually be world champion, Peter has done everything in his power to set up the ideal environment – something Matthew identifies as psychology buzzwords "environment-person match".

"His environment and character have absolutely matched the pursuit and mission that he had," says Matthew. "Every day he lives out what he's meant to do so he doesn't wait until the world championship and think 'OK, time for me to be switched on', he does it every day and does it really, really well."

Peter trains five to six hours per day, communicates regularly with his various coaches and mentor and goes the extra mile to ensure his body functions well in training and races. Regular massage and chiropractor appointments are scheduled in, but Peter's biggest focus outside training is his nutrition. Shopping at the Subiaco markets for fresh fruit and vegetables, Peter's diet does not fit the stereotype of an elite athlete.

"I focus a lot on nutrition and over the 10-year period that I've been a professional triathlete, my diet would be totally different (to what it was when I started)," says Peter.

Peter believes a diet based on simple principles is ideal for his 60kg frame. Although he has never had weight issues, believing no matter what he ate he'd remain the same size, he is committed to eating "raw foods, grains, nuts and filtered water" as the staple of his diet.

"There's a huge difference eating a simple diet," Peter says. "But our lifestyles have moved away from this – we want fast, easy, frozen stuff and so much of what people eat is processed."

Surprisingly for an elite athlete, Peter does not eat pasta as he believes it is not the best fuel for his body.

"Ten years ago I ate pasta often and I thought I was doing all the right things, but I've learnt there are better ways," says Peter. "At the elite level, not much separates people. The confidence I have comes from the nutrition side of things, I know I can win because these guys are not prepared to do what I do."

From detox programs to regular blood testing, Peter takes everything to the next level.

"I'm not a normal person and I don't want to do normal things," says Peter. "I know my body will function better than someone next to me on the start line because I go to extra efforts to look after my body. That gives me huge confidence."

Aside from nutrition, Peter's philosophy has also changed as he finetunes exactly how he can get the very best from himself. When he first began racing professionally, there was nothing else more important than triathlon.

"All I ever wanted to do was triathlon – it



**SWEET SUCCESS:** Triathlete Peter Robertson crosses the finish line triumphant at the 2005 World Championships in Gamagori, Japan.

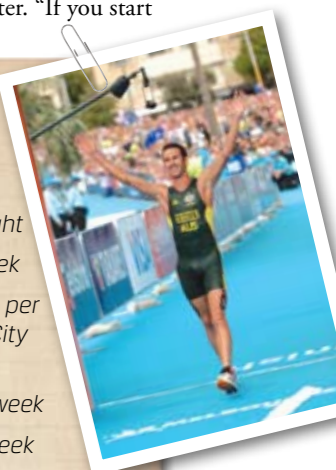
was all-consuming and I was happy to neglect everything else because I got so much enjoyment out of what I was doing," says Peter. "I was living the dream – a professional athlete travelling and winning races, getting lots of attention. It was exciting!"

Over the years, a balanced lifestyle has become more important. Like any demanding career, learning to rest when his body needs it, having the occasional morning off training, and factoring proper holidays into his schedule is critical.

"I make sacrifices preparing for events but I think I've done well over the years not to miss out on too many things," says Peter. "If you start

## SNAPSHOT

- 5-6 hours of training per day
- 8 hours sleep each night
- 6 days training per week
- 25-30km of swimming per week (with local club City of Perth)
- 400km of cycling per week
- 70km of running per week
- 2-3 massages per week
- 1 chiropractor visit per week
- 2kg of nuts consumed per week
- 25 litres of filtered water drunk each week
- Around 10 countries visited per year





adding up all those things you're missing out on, it can have a negative impact on your performance."

Just like any highly stressful job, factoring in breaks is essential for Peter to achieve the best out of himself during race preparations. After nine years of back-to-back racing, Peter went trekking in Nepal over the summer of 2006-2007 to totally switch off from triathlon.

For those in the business world, the ability to switch off and know when to take time out can also be a challenge. According to Department of Consumer and Employment Protection research, "employees who are not able to balance work and lifestyle commitments may be suffering stress, and work performance may decrease."

Just as it can be difficult to drag a busy executive from their desk, it is hard for an elite athlete to comprehend when the body needs a rest. Peter believes one of the main reasons he achieves beyond those who put in as many hours of training, is that he knows how to achieve a work/life balance.

In coming months, Peter is travelling overseas to compete in some non-drafting triathlons (drafting during the bike leg is legal in most elite races), which is a new challenge and something he is excited about.

"The direction I've chosen now is more non-drafting and longer races," says Peter. "It's a new focus and with that comes new motivation." ■



**ALL SMILES:** (above) Feeling good at the Commonwealth Games 2006, on his way to a bronze medal; (right) trekking in Nepal gave Peter the opportunity to switch off from his job, and to come back with renewed focus.

### GETTING IN THE ZONE

Years of toiling away at training and being the best athlete or top in business might take you to the right place, but psychologist Matthew Burgin believes blocking out all distractions once you get there is the key to success.

"In the case of successful athletes, at the moment of an Olympic Games or World Championships – they look around and think 'wow, this is just the place I want to be, this is the moment I've prepared for and I'm so pleased it's here'," says Matthew.

Not being overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation or being overconfident, but simply focusing on the task at hand and enjoying every moment fills the head space of a successful person.

Similar principles can be applied in the office. Put all distractions aside, focus on the task at hand and enjoy the space you're in.

### SHARED MENTALITY Perhaps not immediately apparent, but the mindsets of successful business people and champion elite athletes are not far removed from each other.

WAIS executive director Steve Lawrence draws numerous similarities from high achieving business people to the outstanding athletes that train and compete under the guidance of WAIS.

"Both seem to be very goal orientated and self aware, understanding their strengths and weaknesses," says Steve. "They're sensitive to the environment in which they operate, whether it be competitors or market trends, and most importantly they deal with success and failure in a positive manner."

Former National Rugby League player Rod Fitzgerald believes the discipline and motivation he had during his playing days set him up to succeed in business. He is now the director of successful national insurance company, SRG Corporate.

"I think the most beneficial link for me has been the ability to set goals and being committed to achieving them," says Rod. "You have to take

setbacks in your stride and continually improve and progress, so you don't give up as soon as something doesn't go your way."

The competitive spirit is alive and well for Rod, who not only strives to achieve set goals in business but also keeps fit doing triathlons (although he'll be the first to agree that it's not quite at the same level as Peter Robertson).

Steve has seen many other athletes at sport's highest level become successful business people including the late Sir Frank Beurepaire (Australian swimmer and Olympic medallist who set 15 world records) who went on to build a multi-million dollar tyre empire, Beurepaire and Olympic Tyres; one of the world's greatest middle distance runners Herb Elliot (Olympic Gold medallist and previous world record holder for the 1500 metres) was CEO of Puma and is currently chairman of Fortescue Metals Group, and Nicole Livingstone (Olympian and triple gold medallist at Commonwealth Games) is the founding director of the National Ovarian Cancer Network and a television host/commentator for Channel Nine.

"You have to be competitive by nature and enjoy the wins," says Rod.