

Olympic champion or entrepreneur: What drives the spirit of excellence?

 By [Cameron van der Burgh](#)

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Sports and entrepreneurship share a number of parallels. One of the most important qualities needed to succeed in both of these avenues is resilience - simply put, the ability to keep forging ahead regardless of the situation. Starting a business is hard work, and one of the challenges I face is that I still have to prove myself. It can be frustrating: I've had to overcome the attitude that "you're a sportsman, what value can you bring to a business opportunity?"



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But you just keep going - and eventually you break through the perceptions, start improving and growing the relationships gained in your sporting career and then you slowly build your business portfolio. At the same time, you keep building your personal and professional brand as well.

See failure as a learning opportunity

One way to develop resilience is to see failure and other setbacks as a learning opportunity. For me, the saying is always, "when you're always winning, you're never learning". When you come in second, third or fourth, that's when you adjust your mind-set and say, "How can I be better than my previous performance?" Holding on to that attitude has the dual purpose of helping you to get past the roadblocks rather than giving up outright.

It's also the first step to personal progress – when you start learning and implementing the changes that can lead you forward and keep succeeding. It's the same with injuries – you step back and think to yourself, "How can I improve, how can I change and how can I use this as something positive, to motivate myself to move forward and get better?" Despite previous injuries, Cameron has went on to represent South Africa and win numerous accolades including the gold medal in 100m breaststroke at the 2012 Summer Olympics in a new world record time of 58.46 seconds. He has also won the FINA World Championship three times.

Continuously keep on learning and trying new things

Another principal which I adopt within my sporting and business life is the drive to continuously keep on learning and trying new things. A few years ago, I decided to become my own coach, mainly because this allowed me to devise my own

routine and take ownership of my training progress without having to take someone else's schedule into account.

This gave me the freedom to focus on my own business and getting it off the ground while staying in peak physical condition for swimming. You could say that being my own coach has led me on a quest for innovation: I've always questioned everything, and I love to be intellectually stimulated, so I do a lot of research.

I travelled around the world and trained with some of the best coaches in the world and collected training ideas that I thought would work for me. I would test them out, and whatever worked I would implement; whatever didn't work I would discard. Because how do you do better than what you are doing today, if you keep doing the same thing?

Take it as it comes

I also believe that the bigger the dream, the bigger the sacrifice. The mental victory is worth just as much as a gold medal. I don't think anything worth having is easy – otherwise everyone would be an Olympic champion, or would have everything they ever dreamed of. But life doesn't work that way: What separates you from the competition is how hard you work at reaching your goals.

People often ask me if there was a defining moment that led me to pursue swimming, but I don't think there ever was. Instead, I think there are many steps that are strung together as one embarks on their journey towards success. You take it as it comes, work hard and use that motivation to fuel the fire. And it's the same with the people you meet along the way. You never know who will open or close doors for you – so I live my life, whether it's through my swimming career or my business ventures, by the mantra that you try to be the best version of yourself at every interaction.

Ultimately, I'm a small player in a big business game, but I've started and made the first few steps. I draw on a lot of the principles that I've learnt from swimming – hard work, dedication, sacrifice; resilience and mindfulness. I'm a firm believer that it will eventually pay off.

ABOUT CAMERON VAN DER BURGH

Cameron van der Burgh may have achieved phenomenal success and all its trappings from several Olympic medals but his drive for excellence clearly hasn't subsided. Now in the process of building up his own sports and marketing consultancy in Cape Town and putting effort into his humanitarian work with Steps (a non-profit organisation that enhances the lives of children born with clubfoot in Southern and East Africa).

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