



COACHING QUALITIES OF INTERNATIONAL AND PODIUM COACHES

By Bill Sweetenham

Bill Sweetenham has served as Head Coach of national swimming teams at 5 Olympic Games for 3 different countries, and has coached swimmers to success at 9 World Championships and 8 Commonwealth Games.

Under Bill's management as National Performance Director of British Swimming, Britain's swimmers won 18 World Championship titles, broke more than 200 domestic records and produced their best ever Commonwealth Games, World Championships and Olympic Games results.

Bill is internationally recognised for his strategic planning capabilities in high performance sport www.billsweetenham.com

In the following article Bill provides us with an insight into what he believes are the qualities required to be a successful International Coach (applicable to all high level coaching) and to put athletes on the winners podium.

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My life has been a study of extraordinary and exceptional people, in particular international podium level coaches.

A. The process of winning at the international level contains the following elements as essentials:

1. Plan
2. Prepare
3. Rehearse
4. Perform
5. Win
6. Win repeatedly

Every winning coach that I have observed has these prerequisites in place and applies them without compromise but fully understands that plans change and that life is not fair.

B. Personal skills applied to the above are:

1. Dedicated time at task
2. Presentation
3. Performance
4. Communication
5. Knowledge of product
6. Execution of plan in detail
7. Have a Plan "B" that will achieve the same result as Plan "A"

C. The skills of an international podium winning coach in any sport are:

1. **Be a predator of opportunity** with an ability to seize the moment, a clear understanding that experience is only valuable and important when it is focused on winning. Any expected outcome in performance in competition must be rehearsed under pressure and in adversity in preparation. Preparation and performance must be clinically executed in training if it is to be achieved in competition.

2. **Be highly energised.** Podium winning coaches are highly energised with an unequalled ability but without indulging or spoiling, to make their athletes feel special and important. The best of the best in terms of coaches are consistently and continually harder working in the training environment than the most talented and hardest working athlete on the team. The coach and team can be identified in that they consistently prepare and perform above the standard of the facility that they train at or compete in. If this is not the case, it can be confirmed that the coach has indulged the athlete in preference to making them feel special about performance in preparation, rather than making them mentally and physically stronger than their environment.

3. **Be a communicator.** The best podium level coaches are great communicators with their athletes and support staff, and possess great consultation and negotiation ability, and are able to have the athlete buy into the process and the outcome without compromise. If this is complete, then the world's leading coaches never have to make hard decisions. The structure and the buy-in makes this happen before any hard decisions are considered a possibility.

4. **Be a self-educator.** The great coaches are the world's best psychologists in that they know and understand very clearly the heart and minds of their own athletes, their own staff and of course the opposition. I have found two divisions in this category in that they are either extremely well researched (a reader) or they have great innovative and creative abilities and have done very little self-education at all. Anything in between the outstanding and great researcher and the core innovator and creator appears to result in indecision and confusion. Great coaches can be described as too hard in their expectations or too easy in their expectations, but they must never be considered as inconsistent or indecisive.

5. **Be a visionary.** The world's leading coaches are great visionaries. They see and know the future and have the ability to place that in the "now". They have the ability to cut away all the peripheral issues and focus on only those things that are going to provide a winning outcome and then develop processes to achieve that outcome before the opposition.

6. **Aspire to repeatable excellence.** This group of coaches are prepared to take the untrodden path, dare to be different, are risk takers and lateral thinkers. They are calculating in everything they say and do and these attributes are solely directed at achieving a desired outcome. They do not waste words. For instance, I was described ad nauseum by the British press and many others as having contempt for failure. These people could not have been more correct. If failure is an outcome due to lack of preparation, direction, discipline or commitment, then failure is contemptible. If it is due to lack of talent, this is acceptable once or twice, but never any more than that as all of these points are identifiable, measurable and controllable and should be addressed in planning, preparation and rehearsal. An excuse is a reason, and no reason is an excuse.

7. **Have an ability to sell.** Great coaches have the courage of their conviction and have the ability to sell this passion to everyone who they work with, be it athlete, staff member, media, Boards etc.

8. **Be selfish.** Great coaches, like great athletes are independent and selfish. They are totally focused on the moment. They are not distracted by issues other than winning and the preparation for winning. Winning is their only considered option.

9. **Practice team building.** This point is usually not developed until the senior years of a great coach where they understand that they should surround themselves with not only the best people, but also the best and good people. They value leadership, management, organisation and they become the entrepreneurs of international sport.

10. **Have knowledge of product.** It is a given that great coaches have an obsessive, ruthless and desperate passion for all that they do and the knowledge and experience to be better than the rest in every area and in every field of knowledge of the product.

Personal bests and process are never the desired outcome for these people and success is never valued in these terms. In terms of a team's preparation, man for man, each member of staff - be it physio, medical, coaching, team manager etc. - must have all these attributes in advance of the opposition team staff in order for success to be the outcome. There must be a clear understanding that the average in all areas of the above must be higher than the average of the opposition team if a winning team outcome is to be the end result.