

ENTREPRENEUR EXPERIENCE

O'Donovan brothers will stop at nothing to reach the pinnacle

The champion Cork rowers are so much more than the good-natured entertainers we watched at the 2016 Olympics – they possess all the key ingredients for success in business and sport



Pete Smyth

I have always believed in the parallels that exist between high performance in business and sport. The more high-performersportsmen and women I speak to, the clearer this belief has become.

However, I have observed one difference: high-performing sportspeople have a far greater insight into the key components of winning than their successful business counterparts. This was reaffirmed when I interviewed Ireland's Olympic rowing silver medalists, Paul and Gary O'Donovan, at the 2018 Cork-BIC Entrepreneur Experience held in Ballymaloe House last week.

The Entrepreneur Experience is a 24-hour event which brings 24 of Ireland's leading entrepreneurs together with 24 of the country's brightest, up-and-coming business people for 24 hours of intense mentoring and learning. This annual event has helped over 200 emerging entrepreneurs achieve their potential over the past eight years.

My interest in interviewing the O'Donovan brothers at the event was selfish. I wanted to learn from their journey and understand the true parallels between their high-performance approach in sport and what the challenges and rewards of achieving in business. It wasn't designed to be a serious conversation but, as I posed some early questions, it was clear that we were going to see a very thoughtful and serious side of them.

Their public persona of being entertainers or even messengers, having the craic, "pulling the dogs" and "living on steroids and spuds" was nowhere to be seen. They knew we wanted insights more than selfies, and insights they delivered. Their insights had clear relevance to business and here's a glimpse into some of the ones that resonated with me.

Dream early and dream big

The O'Donovan brothers were born into rowing and had dreamed of rowing at the Olympics since the age of seven. In their boat club in Skibbereen they had witnessed older clubmates training hard, travelling wide and far to compete, and returning to their small club with stories. As with the great explorers returning home with stories of the new parts of the world they had found, their young audience were inspired by their achievements and stories. In Paul's words: "It was cool and we wanted it."

Even at the tender age of seven, the great honour of being part of the exclusive group of people to have represented your country at an Olympic Games was not going to be enough for this pair. They wanted medals.

Gary talked fondly about the faith the established rowers have always had in the youngsters coming into Skibbereen Boat Club. He said: "We have belief in the youngsters and if they have an Olympic dream, nobody would ever doubt them."

This environment supported big dreams regardless of your age or starting point. Fear and a lack of self-belief are big obstacles in business and sport. If you have people around you that believe in you and allow you to dream big, you have a huge advantage. Fear of failure kills most dreams. Whether in business or in sport, ask yourself if your environment supports your own big dreams. Then ask

if it supports the big dreams of the people around you.

The right environment

Rowing is a sport with deep heritage. The Irish Amateur Rowing Association was established in 1883 as an umbrella organisation for Irish rowing clubs looking to align the sport's activities and rules.

There were 23 founding member clubs of the association, the oldest being the Pembroke Club in Dublin with a history dating back to 1836. Established in 1970, Skibbereen Rowing Club started well behind the competition – in fact, over 130 years behind them.

Skibbereen is a small rural town 80km southwest of Cork city, with a population of just over 2,000 people. Despite being outside the top 100 towns by size in Ireland, it is the most successful town in the country for producing international rowers.

To date, Skibbereen Rowing Club's members have 170 National Rowing Championships wins and close to 100 international medals to their name. This is more than any other club in the country. The magic appears to be the supportive culture of the club and the work ethic and self-belief it instils in members from a very young age. It is clearly a high-performance environment.

Entrepreneurs and business leaders need to be conscious of two environments they operate in: the internal one they develop in their organisations, and the external environment where they gain personal inspiration, confidence, ideas and perspective.

Sitting at the top of organisations can be lonely, and by mixing with other people in similar situations (either formally or informally) you can learn a lot. By being around people who are world class in their disciplines you become aware of not only what they do to achieve success but, more importantly, how they think and what makes them tick. In both business and sport, success starts with self-belief and developing a winning mindset.

Success is built on solid foundations

A builder digs and pours foundations relative to the size of the building he wants to build. The stronger the foundations, the higher you can rise.

From a very early age, the brothers were consciously and subconsciously building strong foundations which would provide the base for them rising all the way to the peak of their sport. They were competitive kids, full of energy, always up to mischief and fighting with each other. Rowing provided them with an ideal outlet to channel these energies without hurting each other.

"They put in the 'hard yards', learning the technical skills early. Despite being technically very different as rowers, they seems to have developed this difference in style and personality into a strength. These solid foundations were built while having fun and developing lifelong friendships.

They talk fondly of their clubmates, teammates and best mates, Mark O'Donovan and Shane O'Driscoll, who won gold medals in the European and World Championships in 2017.

Speaking to them it is clear they love what they do. Gary mentions the importance of having the first 70 to 80 per cent right. Without that, he says, you are wasting your time focusing on the little things. These are the foundations for success, the important things. For the O'Donovans, the foundations include ambition, openness, honesty, commit-

ment, self-awareness, focus, hunger, sacrifice and team work in addition to the physical and technical aspects of the sport.

The lesson for us in business is to get the basics right before we start to hone in on the details. I have seen a lot of companies over the years get distracted by what they see as the 1 per cent changes that will make them world class while neglecting the basics.

Get the big things right early: right dream, right people, right mindset, right culture, right plan and collective alignment and commitment. Even if these sometimes feel too basic to spend quality time on, ignore them at your peril.

Work with what you have

"Control the controllables" by focusing on what you have rather than lamenting what you don't have. The O'Donovans made a decision in 2015 to leave the National Rowing Centre in Farran Woods and return to Skibbereen to train with their original coach, Dominic Casey.

It was a brave move, supported by Rowing Ireland. Dominic was a part-time Skibbereen coach who had trained the club since they were in their teens. Paul and Gary speak of him with admiration and deep respect: "He always believed in us and we always believed in him... He was learning and we were learning... He was willing to put everything in like we were."

The facilities in their small club in Skibbereen were not in the league of those at the National Rowing Centre, but they had what they needed. They worked with what they had. They knew working hard in the right environment was the cornerstone of their Olympic campaign.

As a basic, they established that all international rowing medalists were doing at least 8,000km a season, the equivalent of rowing around Ireland seven times. Distance was important, but the quality of these kilometres was more important. They focused on the quality.

In 2016, the year they won Olympic silver medals, they had clocked up 8,300km of rowing, many of these on the picturesque river Liffey in Skibbereen. So many entrepreneurs get caught in the trap of "if only I had more money or



Paul O'Donovan: he and his brother Gary harboured an Olympic dream from the age of seven
Picture: John Allen

Gary O'Donovan: the foundations for success include ambition, honesty, focus and sacrifice
Picture: John Allen

"Fear and a lack of self-belief are big obstacles in business and sport. Fear of failure kills most dreams"

Simplify complexity

Does it make the boat go faster? This question is the North Star for Paul and Gary O'Donovan and everything they do pivots around this simple question.

They keep it simple, focusing on a plan that can be measured, with no room for subjectivity. No noise, confusion, ambiguity. Either it does, or it doesn't make the boat go faster. Everything they do is judged against this simple question.

This level of focus results in a "no excuses" approach to their rowing. They operate with what they have and still believe they can win. Could the facilities be better? Yes. Would warm-climate training be better? Yes. Do they have to borrow boats at training camps sometimes? Yes.

But the main question is: Will any of these stop them from winning medals or stand in their way? The answer is no. They focus on the priorities: training hard, having their bodies in peak condition and raising the sponsorship to attend vital international regattas.

When I met Paul and Gary in 2015, before they had qualified for the Olympics, I was taken by the simple, almost monastic lives they lived. At the time they were living with their granny, with what little money they had going into subsistence and training. Despite their winning Olympic medals, resources are still scarce and what funds they have are now used to attend key international competitions.

To this end, they are working closely with David McHugh, founder of high-profile agency Line Up Sports to help them with the commercial aspects of funding their 2020 Olympic campaign. Businesses can get distracted and sometimes lose focus on the things that truly drive performance. In business, we often struggle to distil success down to its main component parts with the level of honesty and awareness that elite athletes do.

Simplification sounds easy, but it requires a lot of effort to simplify or distil something down successfully. Once you

have simplified it, it becomes far easier to communicate it, align people to it, stay focused on it, measure it and benchmark it. Clarity is key.

See the world to see world class

You can't expect to win on a world stage without benchmarking yourself against the best in class globally.

In 2015, after qualifying for the 2016 Olympics with an 11th at the Rowing World Championships in France, the brothers attended a training camp in Spain. It happened to be in the same location as the German pair who had come sixth in the World Championships, five places higher than the Irish duo.

The German crew had also won the under-23 World Championships twice. The O'Donovans learned more from watching the Germans than from any conversations they had had with them. For three weeks they saw the German crew eat the same as them, sleep the same as them and row daily on the same stretch of water as them.

The significant difference was the Irish team was clocking up more kilometres every day, which gave Paul and Gary the confidence that they were going to make gradual gains on them over time. Simple observations, but psychologically very important.

Having returned from Australia and New Zealand recently with teammates Mark and Shane, they further demystified the approach and strategies of a number of the highly successful southern hemisphere teams.

Having become friendly with both teams' coaches, the brothers had the opportunity to train with both nations. New Zealand rowing has a world-class reputation similar to New Zealand rugby's All Blacks. Spending time in New Zealand demystified the Kiwis' success for the O'Donovans.

Paul said: "We came away realising they are not doing anything we are not doing, and we actually have better water to train on because there is less disturbance by speedboats, wakeboards and jet skis."

This trip reinforced their view that there is no reason why the brothers can't beat the best in the world. Entrepreneurs and business leaders need to travel abroad, knock on doors and talk to people to truly understand what is happening in their sectors globally. It's hard to become world class if you don't know what the world looks like.

Jump on aeroplanes, visit new markets and don't be shy in seeking to meet world leaders in your discipline. If you don't ask, you don't get. It's good to talk.

Ask questions

It is clear that both of the O'Donovans love to learn and they never miss an opportunity to ask questions and in-



Gary and Paul O'Donovan celebrate winning their Olympic silver medal at the Rio Olympics. In Tokyo they will be going for gold
INPHO/Morgan Treacy

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crease their knowledge bank. Whether it's asking starving rowers in the line for the weight-in what they are eating once they get off the scales, or picking the brains of successful Irish rowers who have gone before them like Niall O'Toole or Sam Lynch, they are hungry for knowledge.

The layman sees rowing as a sport involving a stretch of water, two men, a boat and two oars with little change in the sport occurring year to year. The O'Donovans see it as a constantly evolving sport with advancements occurring in all aspects of the inputs which need to be assessed and embraced to maximise the speed of the boat.

They are interested in everything that could make the boat go faster: training, nutrition, physiology, psychology, physiotherapy, biomechanics and more. The more questions they ask, the more they learn, the more they can craft their talents and gain greater confidence.

Great leaders are great listeners and usually great listeners with a desire to do things differently and better. In most circumstances in business, a leader delivering a great question can have a greater impact than one with a great answer. Listening is an art. A question for all of us: Do you spend more time talking or listening?

Embrace change

In summary, the O'Donovans don't rest on their laurels. Yesterday's win is history. They look forward realising the importance of change to achieve continuous improvement.

Having reached the top of their sport

Great leaders are great learners and usually great listeners with a desire to do things differently and better

they are now constantly focused on the small gains. They embrace change and seek it out in a world where so many people fear it.

It is clear that Paul and Gary are going for gold in Tokyo in 2020. Having been exposed to the inner workings of their minds and their approaches, I have full faith in their ability to deliver. With recent PBs (personal bests) to their names, they are getting better and better, and I wouldn't bet against them.

In business and life we all need to embrace change because the world is changing fast. Embrace it, enjoy it and keep getting better and better at whatever it is that is important to you.

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Fionnuala Wall, marketing manager, CorkBIC, Paul and Gary and O'Donovan and Pete Smyth, chief executive, Broadlake, pictured at the 2018 CorkBIC Entrepreneur Experience at Ballymaloe House
John Allen

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