

## WHAT DO WORLD-CLASS ATHLETES AND TOP PERFORMING SALES PEOPLE HAVE IN COMMON?

Walter Ruckes, Vice President, Sales & Channel Engagement,  
BI WORLDWIDE

The answer might surprise you.

There are so many sports clichés sprinkled throughout the sales process that after awhile you start to wonder if salespeople are a bunch of Monday-morning quarterbacks and cheerleaders trying to relive their glory days like Uncle Rico in Napoleon Dynamite.

“Back in ‘82, I used to be able to throw a pigskin a quarter mile.”  
- Uncle Rico

But today's top athletes, the ones winning the big bowl games and standing on the podium with medals around their necks, are changing the game. There are new rules for what makes an athlete successful.

Smart sales reps are using this new playbook to be more strategic, build lasting relationships and close sales faster than ever before.

Here are the new strategies that top performing players and coaches follow to achieve success:

### **1 Don't let someone else choose your goals.**

Goals are highly personal and repeated research shows that top performers set their own goals. Shaun White, a top snowboarder and extreme sports icon, says, “I stopped playing soccer because of soccer moms. [They are] pretty intimidating to an eleven year old.”<sup>1</sup> He switched to snowboarding, where there was less outside pressure and he could follow his own path. Understanding that your organization needs to set goals is important but don't let those goals hold you back or intimidate you. Find the path, the vision and the goals that fit your strengths - even if they are a little extreme - and you will strike gold.

### **2 Take an honest look in the mirror.**

How many people do you know who go through life almost completely on auto-pilot? We use heuristics to make most of our decisions for us. Heuristics are defined as mental shortcuts – we couldn't get through the day without them. But they often keep us heading in the same direction. In the book “The Art of Thinking Clearly,” Rolf Dobelli lists 99 biases and errors in thinking that can lead to unproductive behavior and failure. Ask yourself: What shortcuts do I take every day that are leading me away from my goals and not closer to them?

### **3 Don't go it alone.**

Gone are the days when a lonely athlete, training in silence, bursts onto the scene to break a world-record and capture the world's collective emotions. It might work in Hollywood but not in reality. NASCAR drivers have their pit crew, skiers and figure

skaters have multiple coaches and long-distance runners have training partners that help them push even further. The sales process may start with a lonely cold-call but rarely do you get a contract signed without a team effort. Technical, legal, product and marketing support is essential to sales success and building long-term customer relationships. The faster you build a team, the sooner you will build your book of business.

### **4 Be different.**

At one time, the curveball, forward pass and instant replay were nowhere to be found on the playing field in sporting events. These breakthroughs were developed by individuals who challenged and questioned current thinking and behavior. The forward pass was attempted 30 times (against the rules) and required sweeping changes before it became a part of the game we know today. Are you thinking differently? Going against the grain (up to 30 times unsuccessfully) despite the odds? Challenging current thinking? And raising the bar for everyone around you at every opportunity – every day?

“How much you wanna make a bet I can throw a football over them mountains?”  
- Uncle Rico

### **5 Stop trying to multi-task.**

Few sports stories are as inspirational as the 1980 USA men's hockey “Miracle on Ice” team. Coach Herb Brooks knew the power of focusing his team's energy on one thing at a time to achieve victory. The best coaches and players know there's a time to practice and a time to play the game, a time to strategize and a time to execute. They know when to play it safe and when to take risks. And perhaps most importantly, they know when to be mentally tough and when to let their emotions go. Juggling many tasks may impress co-workers but focused performers achieve their goals.

### **6 Bring on the competition.**

The best way to raise your game is to take on the toughest competition. Rivalries like basketball's Larry Bird vs. Magic Johnson, soccer's Barcelona vs. Real Madrid, baseball's Yankees vs. Red Sox are notable not because there's a winner and a loser – but because there are two winners. Individuals and organizations that go head-to-head with the best-of-the-best emerge successful because they challenge themselves to dig deeper and perform better than they ever would without the competition.

### **7 Shut up already.**

There is a growing Say-Do Gap on playing fields and in meeting rooms everywhere. We love to talk about our goals, our strategies, our ideas, our problems and our plans. Leaders are especially likely to talk more than they act. Behavioral economists call this trend, “preference reversals.” When asked, we will say we believe what's best for ourselves or what will motivate us to achieve higher performance – but when the talking stops and the actual performance begins, we change our story and ACT in a completely different way. Save the talking for the celebration after you achieve your goals – and you will get there so much faster.

“Coach woulda’ put me in fourth quarter, we would’ve been state champions. No doubt. No doubt in my mind.”

- Uncle Rico

### 8 Be picky.

Try to gain agreement on who the best athlete of all time is and you will quickly find yourself in an argument about what the criteria is and which skills are harder to master and is golf really a sport? Top performers don't worry about WHO is the best – they first decide WHAT GAME they will play. The concept of idiosyncratic fit suggests: we will succeed when we perceive we have an advantage over our competitors in a given opportunity. Take a look at your strengths, be picky and determine where you have an advantage. Then go for it.

### 9 Reward yourself.

The promise of a paycheck brings us all to work but current research in behavioral economics confirms that individuals will work harder for a non-cash reward. If you are strictly motivating yourself or your team with only monetary rewards, you will run out of money before you reach your goals. Rewards like travel and luxuries that people have a hard time justifying buying for themselves make the best rewards. Lisa Jackson, author of "Running Made Easy", has a beginner's training plan that includes rewards ranging from treating yourself to a movie, splurging on a spa day or simply enjoying your favorite meal when you reach your goals.

"Ohhhh, man I wish I could go back in time. I'd take state."

- Uncle Rico

Whether you are an athlete going for the gold, a sales manager or rep looking for a win, or even Uncle Rico reliving your glory days, there are new rules and strategies that will help you separate yourself from the middle of the pack and achieve top performance. If you want to change the game, you need to stop talking about change and set new goals – your own goals – for where you want to be when the buzzer sounds, the game is over and the champion is crowned.

**BIWORLDWIDE** applies the science of behavioral economics to design, communicate and reward salespeople for the behaviors and results that make your organization successful. We offer a number of solutions to help our clients drive results, including GoalQuest®, the only patented incentive solution in the industry.

For more information on **BIWORLDWIDE** and GoalQuest®, visit:  
[BIWORLDWIDE.com/GoalQuest](http://BIWORLDWIDE.com/GoalQuest) or email us at [info@BIWORLDWIDE.com](mailto:info@BIWORLDWIDE.com)

Source:

1. Wise, Mike. "Code Rad for American Snowboarder."

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/09/AR2006020902115.html>

