

Discover Your Inner Olympian

Would you like to discover the secrets to finding motivation so strong that you will stay on the fitness track, no matter what?

Well, few know such secrets better than do Olympic athletes and the sports psychologists with whom they work. After all, Olympians live for their sports of choice and have the intense discipline and drive required to see something through until, if all goes as hoped, their goals become gold.

How do they get there? How do they rise at the crack of dawn; push themselves to the gym, track, rink or slopes every day; and stick to a healthy, body-fueling diet -- all to ensure they'll keep achieving? It's about much more than the desire to win a medal.

Here, in honor of the 2012 London Games, an expert panel offers its top techniques for staying motivated -- ones that you can apply to any aspect of your fitness, so you can succeed in your own personal quest for greatness too.

1. Set specific goals

If anyone knows about achieving goals, it's Tricia Byrnes, a 2000 Winter Goodwill Games gold medalist. The first step to achieving her aspirations was deciding what they were.

"Having something to work toward gives you a reason to go to the gym or do anything that will get you to your destination," Byrnes says, adding that it's essential to reach for something tangible. "There's a big difference between 'I want to look like that girl,' and 'I'm going to go to the gym to become the fittest version of myself,' " she explains.

So, for Byrnes, the tangible goal was to become the best possible snowboarder she could be. As she continually realized that goal, an even bigger one -- to win an Olympic medal -- became more and more realistic.

Motivational exercise: Write down your specific, realistic goal or goals. (For example "to participate in a 10k race" or "to hike the Appalachian Trail.")

2. Make it personal

Byrnes set her sights on becoming a great snowboarder because it was something she knew she wanted for herself, that she truly believed she could do. Each time Byrnes got closer to her goal, she was the one who felt that thrill of victory, and that kept her motivated to continue.

"One's personal drive needs to come from within," says sports psychologist JoAnn Dahlkoetter, Ph.D., author of *Your Performing Edge* (Pulgas Ridge Press, 2001). "You must want to do it for yourself -- not for your parents, your coach or for the medals -- because this is exactly what you want to be doing." Otherwise, the motivation to stay on track may prove more elusive.

Motivational exercise: Write down the reasons for your goal(s), and focus on how each will benefit you personally. (For example: "I will have more energy, strength and higher self-esteem to do the things I love." Or, "I will gain a sense of accomplishment that will make me feel capable of anything.")



3. Tap your passion

Olympians have an intense ardor for their sports and love everything about what they do -- not just the outcome. George Leonard, author of *Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment* (Plume, 1992), says you must seek to fall in love with the process of practice. To do so, you must access any deep, stirring reason for your fitness goals -- find something that you love to do, and do it with all your heart.

Olympic gold medalist Tara Lipinski explains it quite simply: "Each day I get on the ice, I love it just as much as when I first started. Enjoying the whole process makes reaching your goal that much more satisfying when you get there."

Motivational exercise: Write down what aspects of your fitness goals you're most passionate about and what you can enjoy about the process itself. (For example: "I am passionate about having limitless energy. Powering through a cardio class at the gym makes me feel invincible." Or, "I am passionate about raising funds for a charity by finishing a 10k race. I love the sense of accomplishment and pride I feel each time I train.")

4. Plan small steps with measurable results

Olympic athletes work toward their goals at a progressive and deliberate pace. Byrnes explains how the process helps her stay on track: "Our coach makes us fill out a weekly checklist, profiling our workouts." She says this helps her remember what she needs to focus on -- and that she doesn't try to do more in one day than she can realistically complete.

"You wouldn't go to the store and try to buy a year's worth of food, you'd break it down week by week," she says. "It's the same with working out. You motivate yourself to go by taking one step at a time." As Dahlkoetter says: "When you set your sights on something, big or small, and achieve it, you want to stick with it."

Motivational exercise: List the steps you can take to achieve the goal(s) you set in #1. (For example: "Complete three weekly cardio and two weekly strength workouts.") Make these steps as detailed as you can, check each one off as you go, and record how empowered each success made you feel.

5. Be a team player

Olympians are rarely, if ever, going it alone -- and the people cheering them on have a tremendous impact on their ability to stick with their mission. "My friends and teammates motivate me," Byrnes says. "It's so much easier to stay committed if you're not in it by yourself. Even if your sport is technically an individual competition, the support group is what keeps you going. You push yourself harder because you don't want to let the people around you down."

Motivational exercise: Make a list of people who might support your desire for a healthy lifestyle, or get an exercise partner or personal trainer. Write down what you'd like your supporters to do. (For example, "I'll ask my husband or a neighbor to walk with me three nights a week.")

6. Have a winning attitude

By keeping their eyes on the prize, Olympians keep moving forward. "Every day I procrastinate about going to the gym, but I know I can do it, it will make me feel better and it's getting me closer to my goal," Byrnes says.

To stay positive, sports psychologist John A. Clendenin, president of the Athletic Motivation Institute, suggests focusing on what you do well. "Don't lament over what you lack," he says. "Instead, think about what talents you're going to exploit and visualize yourself actually achieving your goal." As Olympic silver medalist Michelle Kwan says, "After skating, I focus on whether I did my best, regardless of whether I've won or lost. If I've done my best, I don't regret anything -- so I feel like a winner, whether I'm on top or not."

Motivational exercise: Write down the things you can do well, that will help you get closer to your goal. Then, visualize yourself successfully accomplishing your goals.

7. Out-do yourself

An Olympian's competitive spirit also keeps her going. "Olympic athletes are on a journey to become better," Clendenin says. Byrnes wholeheartedly agrees: "I want to be a better snowboarder, to compete on a high level and continually get better. My desire to progress, push and challenge myself is what keeps me motivated." Even if

you're not competing against others, you can always be your own opponent -- striving to beat your own record as you go. Trying to get better at something will help you to keep going.

Motivational exercise: For each step you outlined in #4, detail what you're going to do and how you're going to progress from there. (For example: "My first week of cardio workouts will consist of 30 minutes on the treadmill at a moderate pace. In week two, I will strive to increase the length or intensity.")

8. Bounce back

When an Olympic athlete falters, she picks herself back up and keeps going. "It's hard to stay motivated when things aren't going well, but you must erase the negative thoughts and get back on track," says Cammi Granato, gold medalist on the 1998 U.S. ice hockey team.

Lipinski says that practice can help you become more resilient. "When you rehearse and mess up, you keep going. Eventually, it becomes a reflex -- you get back up without even thinking about it."

Dahlkoetter adds that overcoming obstacles builds character: "Top athletes view setbacks as an opportunity for learning, so they're more motivated to keep going." Lipinski agrees: "When I look back at the Olympics, I don't just remember the good times, but the hard times too. Those tough times are important because they help you conquer new problems."

Motivational exercise: Make a list of obstacles you may encounter as you progress toward your goals, then list how you can overcome each. (For example: "If I oversleep and miss my morning workout, I'll go to the gym after work -- or I'll reschedule my workouts for the evenings.")

9. Stay safe and strong

One sure-fire way to stop an athlete from getting to the Olympic games is an injury. "I need to have a strong and flexible body during the season," Byrnes says. "If I'm not in good shape, I have a higher chance of hurting myself."

The same goes for diet. If athletes don't fuel their bodies properly, they don't have the energy and stamina to perform optimally. "When you give your body what it needs, you feel better and perform better," Granato says. By combining a healthy diet with a moderate (not inappropriately intense) exercise program, we can all stay healthy enough to stick with our goals.

Motivational exercise: Write down how you can prevent any injuries and stay healthy as you pursue your goals. (For example: "Do only two hard workouts a week; consume no less than 1,800 calories per day; drink at least eight glasses of water each day.")

10. Get some R & R

Downtime is not just encouraged by most Olympic coaches, it's required. "Our whole team meditates three times a week," Granato says. "It forces me to take a break, which is really important if you're trying to stay motivated." In addition to helping prevent injury, as addressed in our previous point, rest also helps you achieve balance and avoid burnout, Clendenin says. "It's important to calm your mind and body so you can recover and replenish yourself."

Motivational exercise: Write down how you'll rest and recover along the way to reaching your goals. (For example: "Get eight hours of sleep each night; read quietly for a half-hour per day; journal for 15 minutes a day; take a day off between strength sessions.")