



# REACHING NEW HEIGHTS:

## Challenging Your Personal Best

What factors motivate a person to go above and beyond their personal best? What pushes them to persevere and take on each new challenge with renewed focus and determination? In this interview, **KEVIN ORR**, former Paralympic athlete and head coach of Canada's National Wheelchair Rugby Team discusses the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators on an athlete's performance and ability to succeed.

### **In your experience as a coach, how important are external motivators versus an individual athlete's personal drive?**

**K.O.:** An athlete's personal drive is most significant – it's what initially gets them engaged. The external factors are the "carrots" that keep them going. Whatever the external motivators may be, a gold medal, a sponsorship or publicity, if the individual doesn't have the intrinsic drive to do what they feel is going to benefit them; they aren't going to do it. They aren't going to succeed.

In the Paralympic realm, I think it's important to have a little bit of both. The idea of someone who wants to be independent, who doesn't want to let their disability bring them down, who has the drive to be the best most complete person they can be is important and it is unique to Paralympic competition. Athletes at the Olympic level often overcome obstacles and challenges but there is a difference in Paralympic sport where many competitors have received injuries and before they can progress to become an elite athlete, they need to work hard in all facets of their life to get back

to where they were before they were injured. Initially, they may need a bit of a push to get them on track, but from then on they have to be the ones who want to carry through.

### **How do you harness each athlete's internal drive? How is this best achieved?**

**K.O.:** We give them set goals. As athletes, they want to be better and they want to know what they can do to become the best that they can be. For our team, we focus on three areas or "key ingredients": fitness, better decision making on court, and mental toughness. Then, day to day, week to week, we set tangible goals – many of which are individualized to what each person wants to do – to ensure the team is making improvements in these areas. For example, if an athlete can run one kilometer in five minutes, we'll work to get that time under five minutes.

That's one of the neat things about working with a team. You have different elements that work really well together, you have people



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with different skill sets and you have to fit them together to make a complete package. For each player, the trick is to find out what they can do for the team.

**How do you keep your athletes motivated through long workouts or after a tough loss?**

**K.O.:** Again it's about setting goals. If the external motivator is the gold medal, we think backwards – what are the steps that we need to take to get there? We always start by addressing the goals (we need to be fit) and focusing on them in the day-to-day.

In my experience, it's actually easier to get back on track with your goals if you've recently gone through adversity – whether it's a loss, or something else that's been difficult. Adversity helps to focus peoples' attention to what details they need to work on. Whereas, once they've had success, they begin to think, “Well, I did this and we won...” and it starts to become about the individual versus the team. Although, each player needs to work on certain things individually, it's important not to fragment the “this is what I'm doing” from what the other 11 players on the team are doing. We (the coaching staff) individualize goals for each player based on what they can do for the team.

**Is it difficult to develop and implement a team wide motivation strategy?**

**K.O.:** People want to have success in what they do, but the reasons for wanting that success is often different. To keep them motivated, it's a matter of understanding their reason, whether it's recognition, pride, money, or something different altogether. Is it knowing that you are the best? That is something that I personally strive for. Having common goals helps to keep the team focused and motivated to achieve the same outcome.

To help motivation in the day-to-day training environment, we have sport psychologists working with the players and the group. We've also had other successful athletes come in to speak with the team. The Canadian men's rowing team came in to tell us

about their experiences in Athens, they also talked about how they coped with loss and injury. The Canadian women's hockey team also came by. They spoke about how they recovered from their Olympic upset, changed their strategy and approached the Games in Vancouver differently.

A challenge that can pop up is when an individual's motivation to succeed gains priority over the team's. When they are out on the court, you want to make sure they are acting to benefit the team and not just themselves. We have found that if a player tries to go beyond the scope of what they typically do, there is a chance that it could breakdown what the team is trying to accomplish. There is a fine line between the individual player's motivation and the team's. It's important that everyone is working in the context of the team.

**What do you do to help your athletes /team maintain or increase their intrinsic motivation?**

**K.O.:** A lot of it is knowing what makes them tick and having team and individual goals. We have 19 spots on the National Rugby Team and players need try out and qualify to make the team every year – it's a motivation. Once they make the team, they also have to compete amongst themselves for playing time. If this is something that they want, they need to put in the work to stay in the game. It isn't always possible to bolster intrinsic motivation though.

Having other activities and interests on the go is vital to maintaining success and longevity; they can't be living for rugby alone. If it's all they're thinking about and it's all they're doing, they're ultimately going to experience some down moments and their intrinsic motivation will eventually go away. So we encourage them to keep busy by increasing their education, volunteering their time, getting involved in mentorship programs and working with community rugby teams, etc. This way, they have to time manage their training which results in more structured and focused workouts.

One of the other things that we're looking at is encouraging the players to get their coaching certifications, so that they can see what it is to teach. It's a way to maintain their motivation and show them that there is more to the coach's role than setting up lineups.

All of these tactics bolster intrinsic motivation and ultimately make for better players and a stronger team.

**What differences in performance and attitude have you observed in an athlete that is motivated by intrinsic factors versus extrinsic factors?**

**K.O.:** The individuals with strong intrinsic motivation are leading our team and leading the sport in Canada. I'll throw out a name because he's a great example: David Willsie, our captain. At 44 years old, Dave is the oldest member of our team. He's fit, he works fulltime and, in addition to his commitment to training, he runs the London Club, oversees fundraising, and has also taken on the mentorship of some of our younger players. This isn't anything that you have to tell him to do; he takes the initiative. He's well connected and active within the community. He's the guy asking all the right questions and he has a great "let's get it done" attitude. He's out there every day contributing to win.

**How would you describe your role in the recognition and reward process?**

**K.O.:** Openly, I focus on congratulating the team. I have informal one-on-one meetings with players to help coach them individually. These typically happen informally and are a great opportunity to acknowledge a good pass, a job well done, or when a tangible goal is achieved. My approach is typically more of a pat on the back. It's also important to understand that everyone has a different role to play. You can't just get excited for the player scoring all the goals; you have to make sure that you credit the individual(s) that allow those goals to happen.

**You've been in a coaching capacity for a few decades. As you've worked with different generations of athletes, have you identified differences in younger athletes' motivation and drive?**

**K.O.:** One of the best things that Canada Wheelchair Rugby has done is establish a tradition around rookies. So when someone comes in, whether they are 17 or 40, the expectations are the same. It means showing up to meetings on time, wearing Canada gear, having your equipment ready, etc.

Are the younger players motivated to train? I think so. It might be a difference in work ethic or a generational quality but in some cases, the work ethic of some of our older players seems to be better. The older players, through rookie-ing the younger ones, are able to address this though. When you have athletes from 18 to 44 playing together, it's not about the generation. It's about what is required to be a successful Canadian rugby player.

I have found that the younger athletes are more eager to know what it takes to become a world-class athlete. They want to know what they can do to be better. There is a desire to learn from the older generations.

**Can you think of a situation in which motivation (extrinsic or intrinsic) turned things around and made the difference between a "win" and a "loss"?**

**K.O.:** Last year, we lost to the US team in a qualifying match in Bogota. Day to day, week to week, the quality of training after that loss went up. We were able to turn things around and play at a higher level after that. That negative motivation – never again! – kept us on target and led to a lot of positives: the quality of training got better; the team was united in their efforts; the degree of honesty and conversation among teammates increased; the experience also built up the team's mental toughness. Our main frustration after that loss was the knowledge that we did not perform at the level we were capable of – the goal became, what can we do to be better?

**In your mind, what is the true value of recognition? Do you see a direct correlation between increases in success/performance and those who have been recognized in the past?**

**K.O.:** Success breeds success. Once you've had success, you're more likely to continue on that path and be recognized. By achieving recognition, you can get more people engaged and involved. The true value of recognition is in using the tools of your success to help others. To me, wheelchair rugby, Paralympic sport, it's all about destroying stereotypes. Paralympic sport is about true human potential, it gives participants the opportunity to shift focus away from what they can't do and emphasize what they can do. In 1988 at the Paralympic Games in Seoul, they paid 50,000 people to sit in the stands. This past summer in London, 2.5 million tickets were sold – that's a significant shift as far as the recognition of success, performance, and human achievement goes. ■





# When Corporate Culture Is Synonymous with Recognition and Accountability



At Roche Diagnostics, recognition goes far beyond the usual practices; it is a key component of the company's culture. Accountability is a powerful driving force behind the organization's values and convictions. Here's how it works.

BY SYLVIE BERGERON