

## **Intangibles**

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**“There are no such things as intangibles.  
The so called intangibles are very real.”**

Some time ago, a shooting coach and one of his student athletes had an opportunity to sit informally with a senior sport executive and discuss the topic of attributes that drive athletic success. We will call him “Bill” in this article since he spoke on condition of anonymity. His position is equivalent to a general manager or a vice-president of player personnel for one of the most successful teams in one of the major professional sports. He doesn't want his competitors to know how he selects athletes! This article is based on that conversation and on a later presentation and discussion the executive held with a gathering of high level coaches from a variety of sports. All quotes are paraphrased from notes taken by the student athlete and the memory of the coach.

The topic of their informal discussion was the concept of talent and other attributes of successful athletes. Bill indicated that he and his team's head coach do not look for “talent” nearly as much as they look for the so-called intangibles that coaches often refer to when looking for athletes. The saying at the opening of this article is a paraphrase of something Bill said in the conversation. The “intangibles” are real and he evaluates them. Why does he not look for talent and how then can he be successful?

Bill makes no secret of the fact that, years earlier, he and the same head coach failed miserably at another team. Why? “We talked about our core principles and the kind of people we wanted to hire for our team. However, we did not follow those principles and instead hired the biggest stars – the biggest talent – we could find. We said one thing and did another.” Big stars are flashy, but they often do not do anything for a team's work ethic and improvement – critical factors in long-term success.

“We now look for people who constantly strive to improve themselves, people who want to work with others, who don't sleep through meetings, who show up early and stay late, who go the extra mile, who learn how to learn, and who encourage those around them to do the same.” Instead of looking for the “best” athlete, they look for the “right” athlete. “We do evaluate the athletes in traditional ways (speed, agility, foundational skills, game statistics, etc.) and then do much more. We will spend three hours talking with a prospective athlete to learn all about them, both in and outside of the sport.”

“One's lifestyle outside of competition really does count and good raising is a great foundation. Asking questions you already know the answers to helps to find out who people really are. Understand people, but don't condone their bad habits.” It may seem odd to want to understand an athlete's life story, yet this executive has found that doing so really helps give a sense of how successful the athlete can become. Athletes who come from a troubled past often have a troubled present and future. Those who come from such a background – often through no fault of their own – and who are among the few who take control of their life, turn out to be just as successful as those who had no such challenges. The implication is that, even when “life deals you a bad hand” you are in control of how it turns out.

In talking about talent and super stars, Bill commented, “People are too focused on the trappings of being an athlete and not focused on really being an athlete. Everyone gets caught up in success. Don't get caught up in everything, just do what is needed. What you were taught about sports, teammates, hard work, and passion, when you were eight years old is what really needs to be taken seriously as an adult. Embrace the simplicity of it all.” Yes, this is how one very successful executive thinks his multi-million dollar athletes should operate.

Too many athletes just want to “make the team” so they can travel, wear an exclusive jacket, and get their picture in a magazine or on a web site. Others care nothing of such trappings and remain focused on loftier and substantive goals. Guess who will achieve and sustain success!

Bill looks for far more than just upbringing and the athlete’s outlook. “You have to have a love and a passion for your sport. Preparation and passion are very important. Have a work ethic that matches your passion. Work ethic, work habits, and being demanding of oneself are all very important. You have to be mentally and physically tough – be able to play through situations. Only the strong survive – not just physically strong but mentally strong. ‘Woe is me’ is a bad attitude to possess – you have to take control and take charge.”

He has advice based on years of experience that applies to any athlete at any level. “Positive and constructive self criticism helps keep things fresh and in check. Manage your expectations – understand where, who, and what you are. Identify your strengths and weaknesses and be honest with yourself. Be dependable. Take responsibility. Allow no compromising. If you crash and burn, at least do it while you are doing what you believe in and doing it how you believe.”

Bill continued, “Pay attention, work hard, be intelligent in your thinking, and resist being easily distracted. Harness the same energy you had when you started the sport. Show willingness to work hard, don’t just talk about it. One has to have discipline! Development needs a lot of attention, especially at first. Sometimes you think you know everything about a subject, but you really don't. Never stop learning.”

“Beware of overtraining. Breaks are necessary. Goals take patience. Expectations put more pressure on – manage them. You have to have trust in your plans. No matter how much control you have over your variables, things can still happen.”

“Winning a championship is much easier than maintaining success. Sustaining success is difficult. You have to understand and be realistic that you aren't going to win every time. Create a team or individual athlete (depending on the sport) to be able to accomplish a goal or sustain success, whether or not that may or may not happen because of reality.”

In short, successful athletes and teams cut out all the “junk”, focus on learning and doing, understand what is really going on and bring a clarity of thought to their training and competition. Success is about hard work, not raw talent. In fact, the “gifted” athletes with loads of raw talent have a handicap. Because they did not have to work long and hard to achieve a level of success, they have not developed the habits and mental toughness needed to endure long months and years of training required for ultimate success. Those with less talent and more heart invariably pass those raw talents who do not also develop the requisite work ethic.

In identifying your own strengths and weaknesses, honesty is paramount. Are you committed to achieving your goals, or are you just dabbling and going through the motions?

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The “On The Firing Line” series is published by the national governing bodies for Olympic shooting in Japan and the USA, and has been adapted for archery as “On the Shooting Line” published by USA Archery. Olympic Coach Magazine, the National Association of Soccer Coaches, and others have referenced selected articles. The entire series is available online at [www.pilkguns.com](http://www.pilkguns.com).

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(Biographical information as of October 2009)