



“WINNING, AGAIN AND AGAIN”

A CONVERSATION WITH SIR MATTHEW PINSENT, FOUR-TIME OLYMPIC CHAMPION

By IMD Professor Seán Meehan – February 2015

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Sir Matthew Pinsent is one of the most successful Olympic athletes of all time. As a member of Great Britain's rowing teams, he won gold medals in four consecutive Olympic Games: 1992 in Barcelona, 1996 in Atlanta, 2000 in Sydney, and 2004 in Athens. He spoke with [IMD Professor Seán Meehan](#) about his career and the lessons it might contain for senior executives seeking to take their own performance to the next level.

Seán Meehan: Matthew, you won four Olympic gold medals over a 16-year timespan. How did you sustain that level of performance?

Matthew Pinsent: To put in some context, it is useful to think of the winning margins involved. Barcelona '92 was a two-man boat, Steve Redgrave and myself. We won by 4.99 seconds, which is a long way. With the same combination and almost the same opposition four years later, we won by a second and a half. Sydney 2000, we were in a four-man boat and we won by .38 of a second. And then Athens 2004, the winning margin was eight one hundredths of a second. No one stood still. All crews set the bar higher and higher. To have any chance we had to keep improving, keep forcing ourselves to find improvements and to really stretch to what had been frankly unimaginable times. More of the same wouldn't work. We were constantly looking for a breakthrough.

Seán Meehan: Well, bring us back to the start of a typical Olympic cycle. Where did these targets come from?

Matthew Pinsent: As a crew, each time we had a very firm visual picture of where we wanted to be in four years' time. You can imagine the white podium, and you can see yourself in the middle and there's the flagpole and the national anthem and the flag going up, gold medal around your neck—that's a very, very simple emotive image to have. And, it's a really powerful motivator. Visualize the goal.

But of course that's not enough. Jürgen, our coach, would also set a target time that we used to call the "100 percent time," the gold medal target. And that time was always faster than the world record; it was always faster than people had ever gone.

The gold medal standard which he had for the Sydney crew was 5 minutes, 46 seconds, so that was our aim. After Sydney I knew I wanted to carry on and do another Games. And so I sat down about two or three months later with Jürgen. He just slid a bit of paper across the desk at me. It was the gold medal speed for Athens, and he'd moved it from 5:46 to 5:42.

Seán Meehan: Four seconds.

Matthew Pinsent: Yes. That's how much he wanted us to go faster. So we trained four more years at 5:42, then I stopped. He coached another British four-man crew that won gold at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The standard he set for them was 5:38. The crew for London 2012 trained to 5:36. In about a decade since Sydney, he moved the standard of that event by 10 seconds.

This means that in the eyes of today's elite squads training for the next Olympics, we are veritable dinosaurs. Ten seconds is an *ocean*. If you raced our crew from Sydney against the guys who competed in London, we would be 10 seconds back. That's not a medal. That's not top six. That's a long, long way back.

Seán Meehan: Then you have four years to reach that goal. Can you give us an idea of the sort of discipline and training that it takes to win gold?

Matthew Pinsent: One of the harshest things about Olympic sport is how long you have to prepare. Each Olympic Games is a four-year training cycle, hours and hours, days and months all chained together—and then you get one race. A rowing race is about six minutes, and it can boil down to eight one hundredths of a second. So how you prepare, both physically and mentally—especially mentally—is massively important.

For every training session, you would have targets for distance, speed and heart rate. A good training session is 20 kilometers. That's about an hour and a half, an hour and 40 minutes. And the training bands for us would be between 140 and 160 heartbeats a minute.

Then you get two hours' break, relax, something to eat, something to drink. Do that session again before lunch, then three times in the week you're going into the gym in the afternoon and doing either heavy weights or circuit weights. You train through the weekends, and you do 20 days of training before you get one day off. Do that three-week block for 42-43 weeks in the year, do that year four times in a row— you'll be going to the Olympic Games.

That's the kind of daily diet that you're doing. And there is no escaping the fact that the vast majority of it is boring. You can't avoid it. Once or twice a week you're going to think, "I don't want to do this anymore." It just has to be done.

Seán Meehan: How did you work systematically to improve the team's performance?

Matthew Pinsent: So we go out onto the water for an hour and a half, then back in, then we stand there in the boathouse—four of us and our coach—and we'll talk. And you'll have little bits of feedback from the other guys. Not for very long, but three to four minutes while it's fresh in our minds what we have done or even more importantly not done.

You know, that can get quite full-on, that conversation; it can be like an argument. But that's what you want. The last thing you want is people who use words like "fine, okay". You want people who are going to say, "Oh, this was good, and this was terrible, and here's why, and I think this..." What you need to make it work is teammates who are truthful, confident and opinionated. It wasn't easy—it isn't totally natural. It worked for us because we knew that if we missed something completely, analyzed our performance incorrectly or deluded ourselves, we would miss an opportunity to improve, to find a millisecond. We preferred to get comfortable with the complete openness of these debriefing sessions than deal with either underperformance or, even worse, days or weeks of sub-optimal training sessions in which we didn't have that insight incorporated into our routine.

Look, Seán, nothing was more important to each of us than winning gold. That made a lot of things very straightforward.

Seán Meehan: Tell us about the mental preparation required to be #1.

Matthew Pinsent: Yes, the last target we had for a training session is training your brain. And that is much harder to pin down. But it's *huge*. You will never find an elite sports person in the gym with headphones on or a magazine in front of them. You are rehearsing for what it's going to feel like when you've got that Olympic final. So you think about this race for years before.

You want to get to a state where you've thought through every possible eventuality, because the last thing you want on Olympic final day is for you to be caught by something unexpected. If you get caught unawares, you're not going to win. If you panic, you're definitely gone. Yes, you're nervous; yes, you're feeling it, but at the same time you want to be there. And that's pretty hard. It's frightening.

As my career went on, I thought it would get easier—but actually it got worse. I was always just this ball of nerves, and I had to force myself to go out there and show everyone what I could do. Although we practice and train all together, part of the discipline when you perform under pressure is you're just doing your job. And you're trusting the other guys that they are going to do theirs.

You start that Olympic race nervous and well-trained and pumped up, and absolutely at the peak of your powers. Six minutes later, you're totally spent. That sensation is not pleasant, to put it mildly—especially the last third or last quarter of the race. If it's a close race, it's pretty much down to who can take the pain more than the other lot. You're pushing yourself to the absolute limit.

It's really tempting when you're under pressure to think, "You know what? I'm going to give this a performance, and it's going to be close to what I can do flat out, but that's all it's going to be. And I'll tell everybody I've given it my best shot; I'll tell everybody we got beaten by a better crew, and my mum will be really proud of me and it'll just all go away." But that courage to kind of risk everything is really key.

I think there were about 20-25 different factors that went into that eight one hundredths of a second in Athens, and even now I reckon I only know about half of them. That's the fantastic thing about

sport. As scientific as you love to be, there is still a bit that is totally elusive. That makes it magical too, of course.

Seán Meehan is the Martin Hilti Professor of Marketing and Change Management at IMD. He directs the [Breakthrough Program for Senior Executives \(BPSE\)](#), which caters to a carefully selected group of senior executives searching for game-changing moves in their business through high-impact strategy and leadership.

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