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# THE ULTIMATE VICTORY

HOW MINDSET & ATTITUDES  
DEVELOP TALENT

Ellen Schouppe  
& Tara Kuklis

Lannoo

## *'Follow your dreams, they know the way'*

1992, Corsica.

As a sport-minded twelve-year-old girl, I watched that year's Olympic Games in Barcelona from a beach hut on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. On the screen I saw athletes achieve the most remarkable performances. Their experiences, their emotions and the emotions they aroused in spectators worldwide touched me deeply and made a huge impression.

In other words, I remember exactly where my dream first took shape. It was there, in Corsica, that I decided that I would one day take part in the Olympic Games myself.

At first, I believed that I would do this as an elite athlete, but after a few years I realised that I did not have enough 'talent' to make that possible. But I didn't let this setback discourage me. 'My dream is still my dream,' I told myself.

So I decided to find a different way to get to the Olympics. I tried to find out all I could about who, in addition to the athletes, is necessary to make this gigantic sporting event happen. Coaches, physiotherapists, doctors? The answer to this question came to me when I watched a documentary about a sport psychologist in Australia. That was it! Supporting people to achieve their dream while at the same time realising my own. It sounded like the best job in the world. And that is what it turned out to be.

Following my graduation, as an occupational and organisational psychologist, I attempted to convince several sport federations of the potential value of sport psychology, but this was far from simple – or successful. As a result, I started work a few months later as an HR specialist in recruitment, before later moving on to a more general role as an HR manager. It soon became clear to me that I had a real talent for coaching people in the workplace and this role as 'coach' was also a good fit for both my identity and my dream.

This encouraged me to have a second try at breaking into the sporting world. I believed that my ten years of experience in the commercial world could be a major added value. Fortunately, Koen Umans, the current general manager of our women's national basketball team, the Belgian Cats, believed it as well. Just as importantly, he believed in me. It was Koen who gave me the chance to take my first step as a sport psychologist. But it was by no means the last. I went on to practice as a sport psychologist in a number of different sports and I have had the pleasure of coaching many athletes. And this is how, in 2021 in Tokyo, I realised my dream to take part at the Olympics Games, helping Team Belgium to perform.

In this way, my talent was confirmed – a talent that has formed the basis for my entire career: the guidance and support of the personal development of individuals and teams, irrespective of whether they wish to evolve in the sporting world or the business world. I eventually combined my experience in both these worlds in my own company: Smart Mind.

It was during a Smart Mind training trajectory that I first got to know Tara Kuklis, the co-author of this book. Her openness, her coachability and the speed with which she mastered the Smart Mind coaching method immediately made a powerful positive impression on me. Her desire to learn and her ambition meant that our paths were destined to cross again before she graduated as an occupational and organisational psychologist. Following her completion of a successful internship at Smart Mind, we embarked together on a new adventure: the writing of this book, **The Ultimate Victory**.

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## Introduction

In this book you will not only read about how world records are broken and gold medals are won, but will also be given fascinating insights into a wider story in which **personal development** is central and where improved performance is a logical consequence of this development.

This story will be told using the testimonies of top performers, offering a unique glimpse into their lives 'behind the scenes'. You will learn how winners think, what attitudes they adopt and how they succeed in achieving their **ultimate victory**.

In the following pages reference will often be made to 'top performers'. In our experience, a top performer is someone who repeatedly performs above the expected norm and thereby continues to constantly develop themselves. Based on the vision that top performers can either be men or women, the appropriate personal pronouns will be used alternately throughout the book.

If you do not yet regard yourself as a top performer, we hope that this book will inspire you and guide you in the direction you want to follow.

**The ultimate victory** means something different for everyone. For a top athlete, **the ultimate victory** might mean breaking a world record or making a successful comeback after her pregnancy.

Or it might 'just' be finding a turning point on the road that has previously led them in the direction of top performance. For you, **the ultimate victory** could be finding the correct work-life balance, or working in your dream job, or making your own business flourish.

Whatever you want to achieve, the road to **the ultimate victory** always starts with overcoming your own challenges. This involves many different elements, such as your personality, your age, your living and working environments, your experiences, your achievements and your dreams. As a result, your **ultimate victory** will constantly change and evolve.

For this reason, we regard the word 'ultimate' as a flexible concept. Consequently, your **ultimate victory** at the start of your career will probably seem quite modest in comparison with the victories you achieve later on. Consider, for example, a young elite sports talent, who leaves home at the age of twelve to attend a special elite sport school. During this difficult period, overcoming homesickness could be **the ultimate victory**, while this achievement might seem like nothing later on, when the girl in question needs to move to the other side of the world to continue her pursuit of her dream.

——— 'A career is not built on talent alone'

As spectators, we see top athletes excelling on the international stage. They are so good that they make elite sport seem easy and their performances self-evident. Such is their talent that they only need to display it in order to be successful.

As an elite sport psychologist, I am much closer to elite athletes than spectators. I know how much their performances demand of them each day. I see the effort that is required to develop their talent and hone it to perfection. I have been fortunate enough to guide elite athletes

right from the start of their career until their eventual departure from the international arena. The way in which they evolve physically, technically, tactically, mentally and relationally is phenomenal, even though this evolution always involves setbacks and difficulties.

**You are not born as a top performer; you develop yourself to become one.**

In both elite sport and the business world, the identification of talent is a necessary condition for remaining successful in the long term. Nowadays, detecting people with talent has become a specialised skill. Think, for example, of consultancy firms that now focus exclusively on recruitment or of the important role that scouting plays in many elite sports, like football. As well as searching for outside talent, many organisations now also set up internal talent detection programmes to evaluate the potential of their own employees and athletes.

Once talent has been identified in someone, that person is quickly labelled as a **high potential**. According to the organisation, this high potential has the necessary talent to ensure that her chances of future success are greater than the chances of others.

That being said, both as an HR manager and as a sport psychologist I have seen many people who were regarded as high potentials but who were not able to realise that potential in the way that was expected. The hoped-for performance and the anticipated evolution simply did not materialise. When this happens, both parties tend to ask themselves the same question: where and/or when did things go wrong? Why was the high potential not able to develop her talents?








I, however, preferred to reverse this question. I did not analyse what was 'missing'. Instead, I looked at the things that top performers have in common, in addition to talent for their chosen sport or profession. I came to the conclusion that this has nothing to do with gender, race, origin, age, training or income. What top performers share is a set of behavioural traits that influence their performance positively. In this book, we will refer to these traits as **attitudes**.

When we are talking about talent development, it is important to emphasise that attitudes can be taught and enhanced! The difference between a high potential and a **high performer** is therefore to be found in the attitudes that the latter uses to convert their talents into great performance. This is something that we will explain and demonstrate in our high performance attitudes model.

### ——— Smart Mind: the high performance attitude model

Based on scientific articles, more than forty structured in-depth interviews with elite athletes, and our own many years of experience in the sporting world, we at Smart Mind have identified seven attitudes that top performers share with each other and allow them to achieve exceptional performance. According to Smart Mind, a person will not have a single 'bad' attitude that hinders their performance. Instead, they will display one or more attitudes either too much or too little. The good news is that the displaying of attitudes can be developed. And the earlier you start, the better! Consistently displaying the right attitudes will help you to realise your full potential.

Here is a list of all seven attitudes, together with a brief definition. In the first part of our book, we will discuss these attitudes at length, illustrating them with testimonies from Belgian elite sport.

	<p>Absolute top performers display intrinsic motivation and a winner's mentality. They work towards their dream and goals in an efficient manner.</p>
	<p>Top performers regard themselves as the owners of their own career. By exercising self-leadership, they can build up a team around them in which everyone influences everyone else in a positive way to strengthen both the top performer and the team.</p>
	<p>Top performers make it a goal to grow continually. As a result, they are open to the learning of new skills that will contribute to their performance. They make themselves coachable by listening to the advice of the experts around them and by responding positively to the feedback of team members.</p>
	<p>Top performers need to push their boundaries and step out of their comfort zone every day. Having the courage to think, train and perform innovatively is essential for achieving the very best performance. Daring to be different by being yourself is an important attitude for consistent success.</p>
	<p>No matter how good they are, top performers will inevitably be confronted by setbacks and disappointments. They will need to overcome physical and mental challenges if they wish to perform at the highest level.</p>
	<p>Energy is the fuel that allows top performers to achieve remarkable things and to set new records. Using this energy wisely and stopping in good time to recharge their batteries, when necessary, is the basis for consistent performance.</p>
	<p>Top performers derive pleasure from the performance process. They celebrate each small step forwards and understand that they have the privilege of being able to do what they love most each day.</p>

All these attitudes are observable. You can see them in yourself and others can see them in you. Optimally displaying just one of these attitudes will not be enough to achieve your **ultimate victory** or to perform at the highest level. The seven attitudes work together and form the links of a chain. The engine will only run smoothly if all the links are well oiled and act in unison. If one of the links is missing, the engine will splutter and stop. To make full use of your potential you need all seven attitudes.

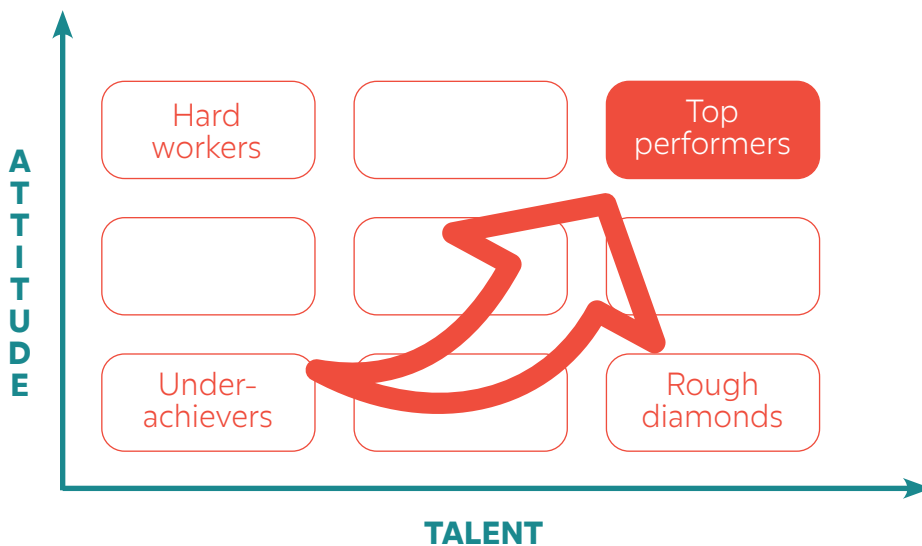
It is not just sport psychologists and top coaches who underline the importance of attitude. Simon Sinek, the author of several books on business leadership, has also recommended: 'Don't hire for skills; hire for attitude'. He, too, understands that your talent, competency or experience can only find their fullest expression if they are applied with the right attitude(s).



## — The importance of developing attitudes

The nine box grid model is a classic talent management model from the business world. Employees are classified on the basis of their talent and performance.

Nowadays, this model is being increasingly challenged, a point of view shared by us at Smart Mind. The model takes too little account of the attitudes displayed by people in the daily execution of their work. By being overly fixated on potential and performance, organisations sometimes position employees in the wrong box. As a result, the development trajectory set for them by the organisation is not always the right one. By giving individuals more opportunity to develop the attitudes described by our Smart Mind model, the organisation can help these individuals to develop their potential in the best possible and most appropriate manner. In other words, we argue strongly for more **investment in attitude development within organisations**.



Traditionally, organisations invest in the group of **'top performers'**. The organisations can readily see the potential in this group and, understandably, wish to develop it further. These are the employees and athletes who are channelled into a high potential trajectory. For them, organisations are willing to release the necessary budget to give them extra guidance and stimulation. As a result of this support, it is only logical that their development increases and that they are able to take even bigger steps forward. In other words, their development is largely proactive. In this way, they can develop the skills that they will use in the future. You can compare it with crossing a river: the group of top performers already knows that you will need a raft and has learnt how to build one. They will arrive quickly – and dry – on the other side.

Working with athletes and employees from the **'rough diamond'** group raises other questions. Organisations and coaches are sometimes at a loss to know how they can develop appropriate solutions for this group. These are people with plenty of talent, but who lack the ability and/or the dynamic approach to consistently display certain attitudes. Organisations will also invest in this group, but in a more reactive way. To return to our river

example, this group will first attempt to make the crossing on foot or by swimming. It is only when they discover that this will not work that they will be offered a crash course in raft building.

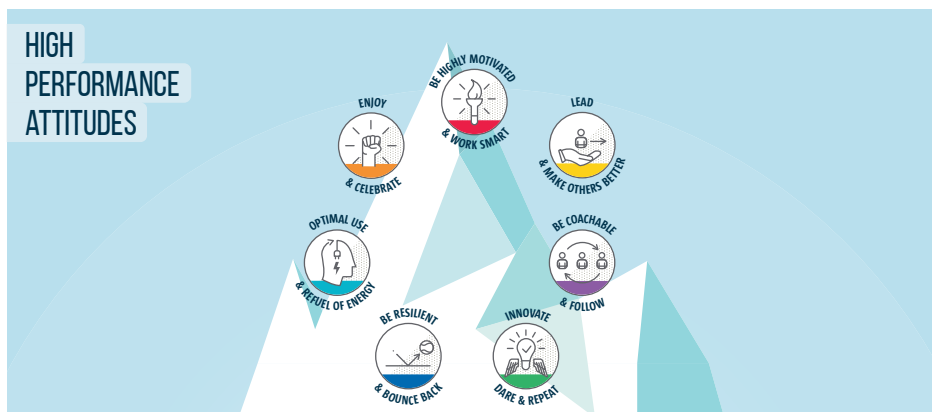
They, too, will eventually reach the other side, but with wet clothes and much slower than the high potentials.

For this group, the development of the right attitudes will be the lever for unlocking their talent. In time, this will result in the rough diamonds performing higher than the standard norm, so that they can make the step **from high potential to high performer**. In this way, the talent pool from which organisations can recruit personnel or top athletes will expand. In today's world, this must be music to the ears of companies and sporting organisations. Or that, at least, is what we coaches and (sport) psychologists think.

Given the dynamic environment in which we currently live, it is better not to wait for things to happen. Proactively supporting the development of talent will teach future top performers how to better deal with the challenges that they will face. And within this process, the development of attitudes is essential.

Because attitudes are translated into observable behaviour, they cannot only be used for self-development, but also form a good basis for coaching sessions with team members or leaders. Taking account of more than performance or a single good attitude alone can open up profitable new avenues to explore. Displaying the right attitudes consistently and in the best possible manner has become hugely important and therefore needs to be discussed more in (sporting) organisations and companies.

In other words, **attitudes can be a lever for talent!**



Let's take **Victor Campenaerts** as an example. Victor began his sporting career as a swimmer, before moving on to triathlons and eventually, at the age of nineteen, switching to cycling. He told us about his path to the top: *'I wanted to be the best swimmer in the world. But at 1.73 metres tall, I was unable to compete with my bigger rivals. It was frustrating. That's why I started triathlons, which went well, right from the very beginning. Until I started to get injuries from too much running. That is why I decided to stick to just cycling – and with success!'*

Victor was certainly not a bad swimmer, but he would never have achieved his current level of success if he had persisted with swimming. In other words, as a swimmer he would not occupy the same position in the nine box grid that he now occupies as a cyclist. By using attitudes as a lever, he was finally able to give full expression to his talent. In large part, Victor owed his ability to display those attitudes to his past experiences. The fact that he was not able to achieve his **ultimate victory** as a swimmer helped to stimulate his intrinsic motivation and focused his thoughts on a different direction. This combination of a high level of intrinsic motivation and smart learning led him to cycling and brought him the spectacular results of which we are all now aware.

## — Feeling competent to deal with challenges

In her own local team, a talented volleyball player feels confident to smash the ball over the net. But as soon as she starts to play for the national team, she starts to hesitate at the net. It is clearly observable that she has less confidence to do the things that she is good at. She says that in her own team she feels competent to deal with the external pressure, but finds this much harder at the national level. The international nature of the context and the increased media attention means that the level of pressure she feels is significantly increased.



Our coaching model is based on the following premise: the more competent a person feels to deal with the challenges generated by their context, the greater the likelihood that they will be able to optimally display the attitudes that lead to exceptional performance.

As a result, our coaching method is designed to stimulate self-insight in the person concerned. Gaining insight into the challenges they face and the levers needed to deal with them is something that individuals must discover within themselves. **With this book, we hope to help not only professional athletes but also other readers to experience this 'aha' moment.** If you are not able to correctly identify the reasons for the display or non-display of certain behaviour, you will never be able to search for the right solutions.

In our experience, it is only when the challenges are crystal-clear that you can develop the intrinsic motivation – whether as an athlete or just as an ordinary reader of this book – to work at improving yourself.

Returning to our example, it is only the behaviour (attitude) of the volleyball player that is initially observable at certain moments. By talking with her about the challenges she is currently facing, it should become clear why she can be bold and effective when playing in one context (local) and not in another (national). This has nothing to do with her qualities as a player or her game intelligence. It is all connected with the pressure she feels. After she has indicated which challenges she feels least competent to deal with, we can move on to the next step and discuss with her a plan of approach to correct this.

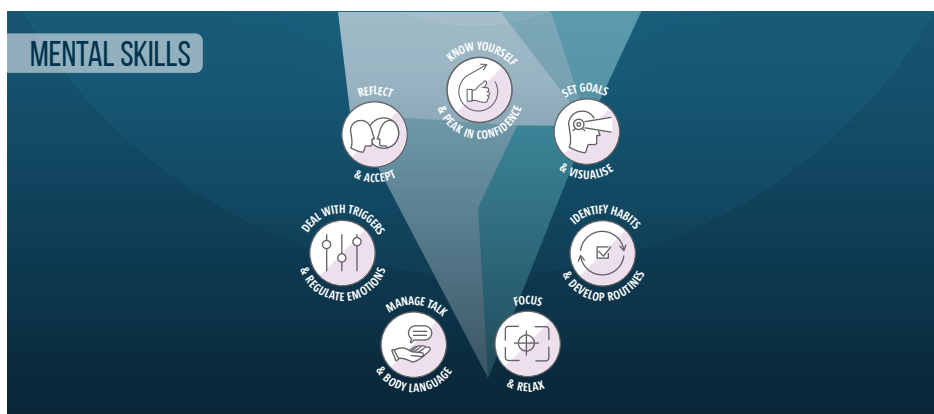
Of course, it is not only top athletes who face challenges during their careers. In the business world and in our private sphere we are also confronted daily with such challenges. On the way to our **ultimate victory** it is therefore important to learn how to deal positively with challenges in all the different areas of life.

### —— Discovering mental skills and using them effectively

After identifying the challenge(s), we look together with our coachee to assess which mental skills can potentially offer a solution for dealing with the challenge(s) in a more appropriate way. Depending on how familiar the coachee is with the relevant mental skills, these are then explained (where necessary) and learnt, so that they can be properly applied.

The development and application of mental skills makes it possible to better deal with the challenges that cross your path. This will result in an enhanced feeling of competence and will ensure that the right attitudes are optimally and consistently displayed.

If you do not yet regard yourself as a top performer, the development of mental skills can be one key step that brings you closer to the **ultimate victory** you desire.



The development of these mental skills can be compared with putting together a survival kit before you start on a long trek. If you only take a torch and a rope, you will still be able to make progress, but you will reach your destination faster and more efficiently if you also take a tent, food, water and firelighters. And you don't want to set off through the forest only to discover half way that you should have brought your climbing gear as well. In other words, you will get where you want to go more quickly when you have all the right equipment – plenty of mental skills – which you can use when the need arises.

How does all this apply to our talented volleyball player? If she wants to play with greater daring, she needs to feel more competent to deal with the pressure she is under. For this reason, she decides to invest time and energy in the development and application of new mental tools, such as positive self-talk and relaxation techniques. As a result, she will feel more competent to keep the pressure of playing at national level under control and will therefore once again be able to smash the ball over the net with her previous level of confidence.

In this way, the three levels – attitudes, challenges and mental skills – work together and also influence each other. Your **ultimate victory** will probably be related to elements that are situated at the second level. The development of mental skills to deal with these challenges will form a turning point in your wider personal development.

### — Become the best version of yourself

The mental aspect is also increasingly regarded as a game-changer in elite sport as well. There comes a point when the differences at the physical-tactical level are so small that you need to look at other areas if you want to make the difference for your athletes or team.



**Emmanuel Stockbroekx** has been a stalwart of the Belgian national hockey team for years: *'As an athlete, you enter an arena where you compete with other athletes who are also very good at what they do. In many respects, you are each other's equal. If you want to come out on top, the psychological aspect is key. Having the right mental equipment allows you to take huge strides forwards. It can really set you apart from the others.'*

Experience has shown that in the business world as well – for example, during selection procedures – attitudes can be decisive in deciding who gets the job or promotion and who doesn't. Nowadays, the vast majority of candidates have the necessary qualifications and/or experience. But they can stand out from the crowd by showing that they are, for example, good leaders, coachable or innovative in their thinking.

#### **The ultimate victory consists of developing yourself to become the best version of yourself that you can possibly be.**

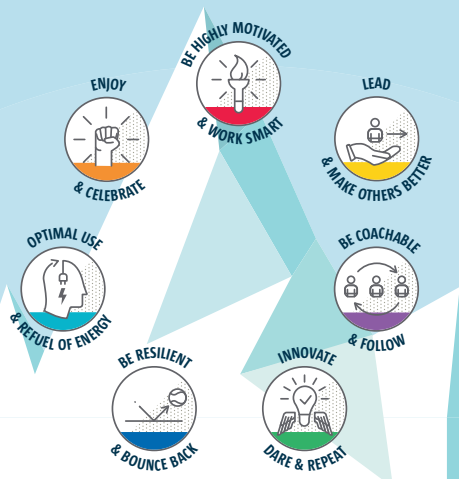
This book can be a starting point or an additional push in the back that can boost this developmental process into overdrive. After each chapter, you will have the opportunity to coach yourself and apply the insights from that chapter. Hopefully, the accompanying stories of top performers will inspire you to bigger and better things. You will discover that most of the elite athletes mentioned in the book first achieved one or more major victories in their personal sphere before achieving top performance in their sporting discipline.



PART I

***HIGH  
PERFORMANCE  
ATTITUDES  
MODEL***

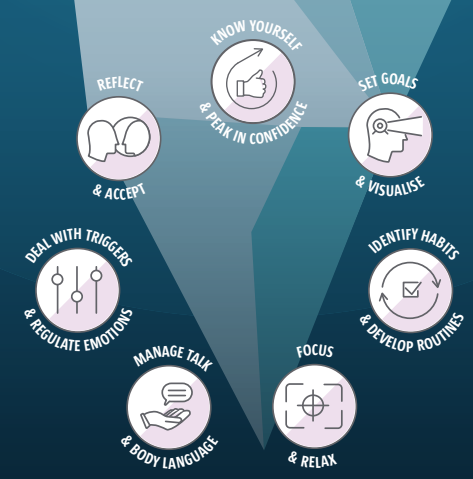
# HIGH PERFORMANCE ATTITUDE



# FEELING OF COMPETENCE



# MENTAL SKILLS





ATTITUDE I

**BE  
HIGHLY  
MOTIVATED  
TO PERFORM  
AND  
WORK SMART**





'Every time I do something, I want to win, to exceed my own expectations, to perform at the very highest level, and to bring home medals and cups. That feeling is fantastic.'

—— **Vincent Vanasch**, hockey player

## Definition

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‘Be highly motivated to perform’

is an attitude that is characterised by an inner drive to perform and an intense desire to take on challenges.

‘Work smart’

is an attitude that is characterised by efficiency, discipline and focus, taking due account of priorities and with sufficient attention for process and performance goals.

## Characteristics of top performers with this attitude

- They believe in their own dreams, but have concrete plans.
- They believe in an efficient and goal-based approach.
- They demonstrate impressive drive, determination and intrinsic motivation.
- They are highly competitive by nature.
- They are prepared to make choices aligned with their goals.
- They know why they are doing what they are doing!

# Top performers are dreamers with concrete plans

## — Believe in your own dream

The story of most top performers begins with a **dream**. They dream of an achievement inspired by others or dream of doing something that no one else has ever done before. In the first instance, this dream serves as a powerful source of inspiration. It can spur them into action, as a result of which they take their first steps towards that dream.



Former tennis star **Justine Henin** explains it like this: *'My earliest memory as a child is that as a five year old I locked myself in my room and threw myself on the ground, with my arms in the air: I had just won Roland Garros again! I have always been the driving force behind my own story.'*

The key question is how top performers turn that dream into a reality. How do they achieve the **ultimate victory**?

By **regularly visualising your goal**, your own imagination gives a positive connotation to your dream, drawing you closer and closer to it. Without immediately noticing it, and dependent on the nature of your dream, you will start to make choices in a more conscious manner and take your first small actions. It is only later that you will recognise these actions for what they are: the first concrete steps towards the realisation of your goal. The **attitudes** displayed by the dreamer as he works towards his goal will be decisive for his chances of success: **dare to follow** your dreams, they know the way.

His intrinsic motivation and the extent to which he not only works hard but also cleverly in pursuit of his dream; the ownership that he takes for the dream; his courage and mental flexibility to adapt to different situations; his resilience when faced with setbacks; the energy and pleasure he derives from his achievements: these are the things that will determine whether he succeeds – or not.

## — Limiting and empowering beliefs

As Justine's story shows, dreams can lead to **deep-rooted beliefs**.

Ken Ravizza, one of the most prominent figures in American sport psychology, has expressed this tellingly: *'Beliefs have the power to create and the power to destroy.'* Conscious and unconscious processes influence our way of thinking and our behaviour. With the conscious part of your brain, you plan, solve problems, and experience emotions. Your unconscious brain is a kind of undercurrent, where your beliefs are hidden. These beliefs originate gradually and are often given to us as part of our upbringing or develop out of our own experiences. However, not all of our beliefs help to move us forwards or bring us closer to realising our dreams. For this reason, it is very important for us to be fully aware of all our beliefs.



Without realising it, sprinter **Hanne Claes** had also developed a number of limiting beliefs, like: *'When I have my period I run slower'* or *'I can only achieve personal best times if the weather conditions are ideal'*.

If they want to make progress, top performers must learn how to recognise these limiting beliefs and leave them behind. As part of this learning process, in my role as a psychologist in both the sporting and business worlds, I always ask the following question: 'Imagine that you had a magic wand: how would you want to behave differently in this situation?' The idea of a magic wand helps people to think outside the normal boundaries and beyond their usual possibilities. Elite athletes dare to think with no limits, so that they are able to put their dream into words: 'I would like to see myself running faster in cold weather'. Next, this sentence is translated from the conditional tense to the present tense, on which we can now build further to turn it into a strong, positive and empowering belief.

In this way, Hanne was able to identify her limiting beliefs and transform them into powerful affirmations, so that she was able to run record times even in the conditions that she used to believe limited her performance. What's more, these new positive beliefs pushed her further and further forward, allowing her to qualify for the Olympic Games in Tokyo and Paris, almost a full year before the official deadline!

In other words, it is important to bring the unconscious part of your brain to the surface by identifying your beliefs. This will help you to use them in a positive way that will move you closer and closer to your **ultimate victory**.

## — Motivation as a driving force

Top performers link their dream to strong and stable motivation. They never doubt their dream goal simply because of a single bad performance and do not allow themselves to be influenced by the mood of the day.



Basketball player **Thibaut Vervoort**: *'As a young professional sportsman, you are constantly faced with new challenges, both physically and mentally. When I don't feel 100 percent – for example, because I slept badly the night before, or the last training session did not go well, or we lost the last match – I get my motivation from the goals I set for myself. These goals can be both short term and long term. My dream goal of qualifying for the Olympic Games has helped me time after time to push beyond my boundaries and deal with the challenges that cross my path.'*

Everyone occasionally has a bad day, week or even month. Elite performers have them too, but they draw new strength from their dream goal, finding the additional motivation that is necessary to get them through difficult moments.

## —— The sky is the limit

What's more, most top performers are convinced that there are **no limits** to their possibilities. Thanks to their talent in combination with their effort, focus and determination, they believe that there is almost nothing they cannot achieve. This way of thinking drives them forward, helping them to realise their dream goals and overcome the challenges that stand in their way.

In 2004, Justine Henin went to the Olympic Games in Athens without specific preparation and with no specific expectations in mind. In fact, she was making a comeback after a period out of the game due to a viral infection. On the first day of the Games, another Belgian – Axel Merckx – won a bronze medal in the cycling road race.

Motivated by the performance of her fellow countryman, Justine won her opening matches relatively easily, until she found herself facing Anastasia Myskina in the semi-final. At 5-1 in the third set, Myskina served for the match – and a place in the final.



**Justine Henin:** *'I can remember thinking to myself: "What is the worst that can happen to you? In ten minutes you will be under the shower, having lost the match. Tomorrow you will be playing for bronze, but that is also a great achievement. But I don't want to play for bronze..."*

*After a remarkable fightback, Justine won the match. 'The next day I was very calm before the final. I knew that I wasn't going to lose against Mauresmo. After what had happened during the semi-final, I felt that nothing could touch me. I was unbeatable, totally convinced that I would win.'*

*And so it was that Justine won a gold medal at the 2004 Olympics. 'For me, it was a magical story. But it was a story in which many others also played a part. Not least the other Belgian athletes, whose support gave me a huge amount of energy. I was alone out there on the court, but I knew the entire Belgian delegation was behind me. That is what made the big difference. It really was a team victory.'*

Justine's story shows just how powerful dreams can be and how deep-rooted beliefs can help you to fulfil those dreams, not only in elite sport, but also in your own professional and private lives. The key factor for success is the ability to **convert your beliefs into concrete objectives** and a set of actions necessary to achieve them.

## Top performers work in an efficient and targeted manner

### —— Begin with the end in mind

Of course, dreams don't just happen. In other words, you will never achieve your **ultimate victory** by chance. It will always be the result of a positive belief and powerful intrinsic motivation, based on a forward-looking plan that you always keep in focus and link to a series

of concrete goals in the short, medium and long term. A successful entrepreneur will only found a company when he is clear about the direction in which it needs to go.

The Belgian Cats, the Belgian national women's basketball team, are an excellent example of this philosophy. In ten years' time, they have grown into a very strong and coherent unit. As the current European champions, they are one of the best teams in the world.

My own story as a sport psychologist with the Belgian Cats began in the summer of 2013 in Slovenia, during their annual training camp. The team had not been able to qualify for a major international tournament since 2007, the year in which they last took part in the European championships. In spite of the recent setbacks, I found a group of passionate players, blessed with a healthy dose of youthful enthusiasm, a strong team spirit and a clearly defined goal: to successfully perform once again at the European level. Secretly, this young and talented generation also dreamed of one day taking part in the Olympic Games.



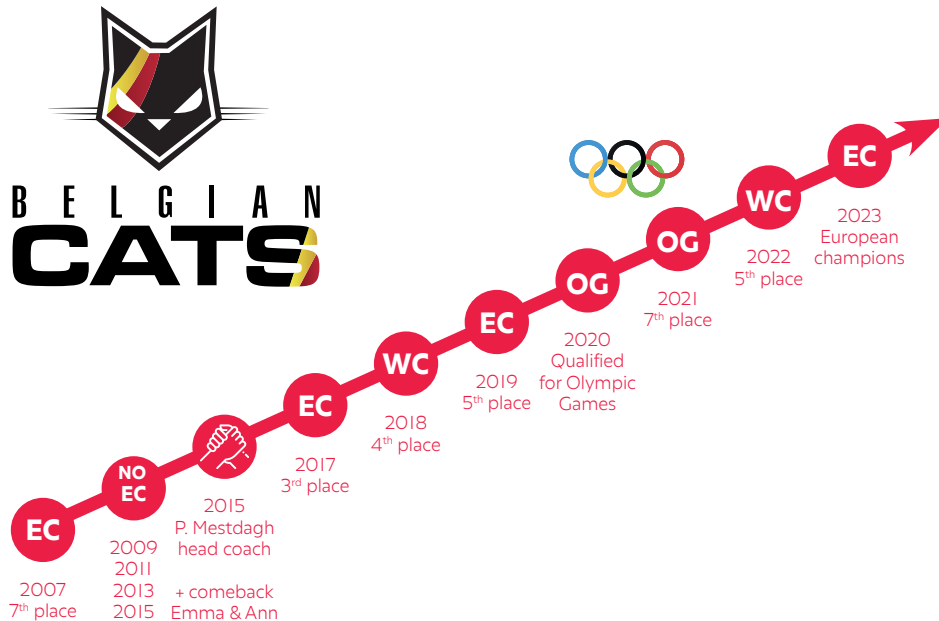
At that time, **Sofie Hendrickx** was the team captain: *'Following a period of disappointing results, a new and more hopeful period began in 2013. I regard this as a turning point in the story of the Belgian Cats. That is when the foundations were laid for the current national team. The support structure around the team became much more professional, both on and off the court. As a player, you noticed that steps were being taken in the right direction. People began thinking about the need to create a shared vision between the coaching staff and the squad. This vision was then translated into a set of common values and concrete goals. That gave us confidence!'*

When Philip Mestdagh became head coach and Emma Meesseman and Ann Wauters joined the team, success soon followed. For the first time in ten years, the team qualified for the following European championship in 2017 in Prague, where they won a bronze medal. This all demonstrates that creating the right framework and the right group mentality can help you to achieve wonderful results.

The bronze medal meant automatic qualification for the 2018 world championship in Tenerife. This time the goal was to be among the top eight teams in the world. In other words, a place in the quarter finals. The Cats started the competition with conviction, won all their games and suddenly found themselves not in the quarter final, but in the semi-final against the reigning Olympic champions: the United States. For many of the players, this was a childhood dream come true. They stood on the court alongside their heroines and gave an excellent performance, even though they eventually lost. The Cats finished the championship in fourth place.

For the Belgian Cats, the Olympic Games were no longer a dream, but a realistic target. Once again, they made a clear plan. First qualify again for the next European championship, aiming to finish in the top six, and then focus everything on the qualification tournament for the Olympic Games in Tokyo, scheduled for 2020. And that is what happened!

## THE BELGIAN CATS' ROAD TO SUCCESS



The mindset of the Belgian Cats clearly changed during this series of different tournaments. After a ten-year absence from major championships, the players used the hashtag **#DareToBelieve**. Following their fourth place in the world championship and their qualification for the Olympic Games, they now use the hashtag **#FocusNext**. This shows how mindsets can change over time in response to successes.

### —— Personal goals with the right intention

Whether or not you want to perform in the sporting arena, the business world or your private life, the true top performers always convert their dream into a **concrete plan**. This plan takes shape through the identification of challenging performance goals. Top performers gradually move towards these goals by focusing first on smaller process objectives or intermediary goals. You can compare these goals with hurdles that you need to jump over before you can reach the finishing line. Between each hurdle your running technique improves and you systematically jump higher, faster, further and more correctly. You come to see these hurdles as learning opportunities, providing you with success experiences and the satisfaction of continual positive progress. In this way, you gain confidence and your chances of success are enhanced. The emotional release associated with the realisation of intermediary goals is less than with your main goal, but this makes it possible to focus more quickly on the next hurdle.

As an example, let's look – appropriately enough – at the Belgian hurdler Hanne Claes. In 2015, when our collaboration first started, it seemed like things had been going against her for quite some time. She had been troubled by repeated injuries, had a difficult relationship with her then coach and, because of her poor results, had lost her contract of employment with her federation Sport Vlaanderen (Flanders Sport). Even so, her dream goal remained fixed as firmly as ever in her mind.

Hanne managed to achieve the minimum Olympic qualifying standard for the 2012 Games in London, but failed to meet the Belgian minimum standard. Consequently, she was not selected for the Belgian team. Again, she qualified for the 2016 Games in Rio, but this time her persistent injuries meant that this was never a realistic option. Hanne was not in the right shape to meet such a challenge, neither physically or mentally.

It was at this point that we decided to redefine Hanne's goal and describe it more clearly. Qualification for the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo was just the 'first hurdle' she would jump. Her real goal was to run in the final of the 400 metres hurdles at the Games, to do so in her best possible physical and mental state and – why not? – perhaps win a medal. Once the goal had been established, Hanne developed a detailed plan to make it happen. She devoted more effort and care to her rehabilitation and trained with greater focus and the right intensity. More importantly, she trained with the right intention. **The athlete who trains with the expectation of winning a medal has a huge advantage over her rivals.** Not only on the day of the competition, but every day and in every training session. As a result, Hanne, along with heptathlete Nafi Thiam, was one of the first Belgian athletes to qualify for the 2020 Games.

Similarly, research has shown that the phenomenon of home advantage in football has a comparable scientific basis. The study showed that coaches expect to win more games when their team is playing at home. As a result, they place greater emphasis on an attacking approach and set their players more difficult tasks. This supports the conclusion that setting challenging goals has a positive effect on the performance of athletes and on the results they achieve (Staufenbiel, Lobinger & Strauss, 2015).



Footballer **Jeremy Doku** has a clear opinion on this matter: *“I don't like it when people ask: “Was it your dream to be selected for the Red Devils or to play for Manchester City?”. Then I reply: “No, it was not my dream; it was my goal”. When you know what you can do, you need to set your dream high enough. Make your dream your ambition.’*

## — Work hard, but also work smart!

**Working hard is good; working smart is better.** Working hard does not necessarily mean that you are working on the right things at the right time. The staircase to success is long, but with a few minor adjustments there are moments when you can take the lift. Of course, this does not mean that getting to the top is easy. But working smart can make it easier. For example, it can sometimes be smart to have the courage to take a step back, to maintain a proper overview of the situation, and to ask yourself some critical questions. The key is to make sure that you work efficiently, that your energy is used wisely.



According to table tennis legend **Jean-Michel Saive**, a combination of motivation and smart working is crucial: *‘If I hear that some players train six or seven hours a day, I am astounded. I don't believe in that. I preferred quality to quantity. I did this by*



*integrating hard physical training sessions into my sport-specific training. I preferred to focus 100 percent for four hours. In that way, my training was both efficient and effective. This helped me to concentrate on quality instead of quantity.'*

In the business world, efficient working is not always easy to achieve. Promotions often go to the employees who work extra hours and are still answering their mails late into the evening. In other words, they do a lot of work. So surely this means that their output must also be super-high, doesn't it? Well, not necessarily. Someone who leaves the office promptly at five o'clock can have an output that is every bit as high, because they work more efficiently. This allows them to leave on time. But that is often not the way that managers and colleagues look at it...

To produce consistent performance over a long period, we advise you to try and make efficiency gains in the way you work. This will allow you to increase your output without the need to increase your input.

### — Pick your battles: one at a time

Consider the sport of cycling, for example. In the course of a season, there are more races than a cyclist can ride. If he tried to take part in all of them, he would soon be running – or rather riding – on empty. The same is true of employees and the self-employed in the business world: there are countless projects in which your manager might like to involve you. The important thing is to maintain an overview of the total picture, so that you can still see the wood for the trees – and can select wisely. In this way, you can invest your talent in activities and projects where you want to (and are able to) perform to the highest standards, but in the most efficient manner.



Swimmer **Fanny Lecluyse** explains how important it is to identify specific events and then target all your effort on them: *'I focus on working towards the major events like the European championship, the world championship and the Olympic Games. I use the events in between to assess my level of performance and measure my progress. The actual result in these events is less important.'*

If you want to achieve your next **ultimate victory**, you need to carefully select the projects in which you wish to invest your time and energy. Identify your priorities, taking due account of your goals, and **dare to say 'no'** when a project fails to meet both requirements. Deliberately refusing a customer or a project because it does not fit in with your long-term vision frees up more time and energy to devote to projects that do match that vision. So remember: set priorities and stick to them!



According to hockey player **Vincent Vanasch**, this philosophy can be summed up in three core words: *'Plan, focus and discipline.'* In his opinion, it is impossible to perform at the highest level without these three things.

### — The goal must be clear; the way to reach it can still change

The world of elite sport and the business world are both highly dynamic and uncertain environments, as a result of which it can be a real challenge to work in them efficiently. The