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## **The Winning Approach**

*by Phillip Molesworth*

In the world of track and field athletics many reach the top in their local competition, some make it to the finals in their state championships and walk away satisfied with a personal best but don't make it to the podium. Others win at state level but the nationals find them wanting and then there is the athletes that excel at this level and qualify for the Olympics or world championships only to fall short in the big event.

Why is it that Australia has only four gold medals at the Olympics in distance events? Edwin Flack 800 and 1500 meters Athens 1896. Herb Elliot 1500 meters Rome 1960 and Ralph Doubell 800 meters Mexico 1968.

What did these three have that took them to the top of the podium that has eluded all others in the distance events?

There are a few athletes that rise to world champions but many that don't. Why is this?

What is the difference?

- Is it physical?
- Is it the training methods?
- Is it hard work?
- Is it the attitude?
- It is all of these?

In this paper I am going to go through my thoughts on what makes a champion.

We will also look at three champion athletes that did stand at the top of the podium and the type of training and mind-set that got them there.

They are **Edwin Flack**, **Herb Elliot** and **Ralph Doubell** the only gold medallists in middle distance from Australia.

But first a little background on my own experience.

I watched while one of my athletes who was a club runner and not a champion as he lined up for a 1500 race in an interclub event. As they were called to the mark I saw him look up and down the line at the other competitors. He finished fourth close to the first three places and after the race I asked him why he looked along the line at the start. He was hesitant to respond so I asked were you checking out which runners you could beat and who you couldn't? He replied yes, so I asked did you think you could beat all bar three of them? Once again the answer was yes. So did the three you thought you couldn't beat all finish in front of you? Again the answer was yes. He knew what place he would finish before the race started so had no chance of winning.

We had a long chat about thinking positive about the result and during the next two weeks I worked with him on the power of positive thinking and going into the race with a winning attitude and not a losing mind-set. Two weeks later he lined up again and this time he didn't check out the field but

instead focused on his race and getting away to a good start. This time he won, the difference was that this time he believed he could and ran with an aggressive attitude.

### **Do you have this approach checking out who you can defeat and who you can't?**

### **Do you know the result before the race starts?**

Another time I was at the Doncaster track and another of my runners was about to start the 5000 meters when he ran up to me while warming up and pointed out an older runner and told me that he had been trying to beat him for a number of races but hadn't succeeded. He said if I go out and lead he comes past him in the last lap. If I sit behind him and follows he manages to get a break and I'm not able to catch him.

So I said OK today I want you to try another tactic. Today sit behind him and wait and when you are coming down the back straight with two laps to go I want you to pull alongside him and look him in the face. Wait for him to look back at you and then smile and push hard to get away. He followed the instructions and this time he won by about 30 meters. So what happened to make the difference? Firstly this is a part of the 5000 when the runners are feeling the effects of the race and are mentally vulnerable. By running alongside him and smiling he made a statement. You are looking bad and today I have got you. It also put the pressure on my charge to go on with the race now that he has made the statement, so he was running scared and got the best out of himself.

Again it was in his head that he couldn't defeat this runner.

## **The Champions**

In this paper I am going to focus on the three Australians Edwin Flack, Herb Elliot (coach Percy Cerutti) and Ralph Doubell (coach Franz Stampfl) With the exception of Flack they all rose to prominence during a period when Australia was at the top of distance running. With a number of world level champions such as John Landy, Merv Lincoln, Ron Clark and Kerry O'Brien.

### **Edwin Flack – The Lion Of Athens**



I will not dwell on Edwin Flack as little is known of his training it would not have been intensive as he ran the 1500 in 4:33.4 and 800 in 2:10.0 at the Olympics to win his two gold medals.

Flack was the Australasian mile champion in 1893 and 1894 and was obviously a fit runner. The Australian championships were created prior to federation as a competition between the colonies including New Zealand. After winning the 800 meters in Athens he got in a coach the next day for a 4 hour trip over rough roads to Marathon and started in the marathon although he had never contested an event longer than 10 miles before. While we don't know what his training program was, it was obviously high in aerobic work that enabled him to compete in events from 800 to the marathon he also competed in the tennis in singles and doubles.

The Americans were the dominant force in middle distance at the time which made Flacks performances special as he defeated the favourites. His run in the marathon was meritorious but he had to pull out at 32 kilometres after leading the race for a while and being overtaken.

Edwin Flack had a winning attitude. He had run faster than he did in the Olympic Games but did what he needed to in the Athens heat to win.

For more on Edwin Flack see

<https://www.athletics.com.au/hall-of-fame-directory/edwin-flack/>

## Herb Elliot



Herb Elliot was arguably the greatest middle distance runner not only of his time but possibly all time. He was never defeated over the 1500 metres or mile and was not actually pressed even at the Olympics in Rome where he won the 1500 with ease breaking his own world record. In an interview with Percy Cerutti when asked what length Herb would go too to win Percy replied he would push himself so hard he would drop dead on the track rather than allow another runner to defeat him. It is doubtful he would need to go to that length but it is now history that he was never defeated over his pet distances.

I read an article where Merv Lincoln (Coached by Franz Stampfl) was on his way to Perth for the Australian championship and at the airport Herb was eating a pie and drinking soft drink along with other junk food. Merv was thinking we are racing soon and this time I have got him. Merv ran the race to try to take advantage of the situation leading into the final straight and almost pulled it off with the closest finish that Herb was ever involved in, but Herb caught Merv on the line to win and then went to the side of the track vomiting. Maybe Percy was right he would not allow himself to be second.

So what was the training that took the 880 yard junior champion in 1955 to the top of the world?

Elliot came to the Melbourne Olympics in 1956 as a spectator after injury prevented him from contesting the trials. He climbed the fence at the Olympic village and met with some of the athletes including Ron Delaney, winner of the



1500 metres gold medal before a security guard removed him from the village. He told himself that the next time he went to the Olympics it would be as a competitor.

Elliot came from Perth for the Olympics and met with the eccentric but great coach Percy Cerutti who convinced his parents to leave Herb with him when they returned to Perth. The training was tough and mostly off the track clocking up distances of 60 to 80 miles (98 to 128 kilometres) a week at varying intensity with a 32 kilometre run about once a month plus the gruelling sand hill runs for strength. Herb also did weight sessions two to three times a week. He did have a day off but the other 6 days were all intense and gruelling work.

In a quote from Runnerstribe.com Elliot said

#### Base Training

*"I train eleven months of the year, half that period being devoted to strengthening work. Here is one of my typical weeks when I was eighteen years of age. (Younger athletes perhaps should not attempt quite so much and older ones a little bit more. It's really a matter for personal judgment.)" – Herb Elliott*

- **Monday:** A ten-mile run at any pace I felt like setting, always finishing hard over the last two miles or so.
- **Tuesday:** Six or seven miles in the morning. Weight-lifting in the evening.
- **Wednesday:** Ten miles hard against the clock.
- **Thursday:** Six or seven miles in the morning. Weights in the evening.
- **Friday:** Rest.
- **Saturday:** Faster 'fun' work-out at lunch-time on the track. A hard five miles or so in the evening.
- **Sunday:** Eight to ten miles in the morning. Eight to ten miles hard in the afternoon.

As Elliott matured, base training consisted mainly of long hard runs of between 8 to 16 km. The occasional (once a month on average) 32km run was also completed. As were sand hills (more below).

The estimated average mileage during this period was 60 to 80 miles per week.

*"In the winter and spring of 1957 I must have run 2500 miles in training and lifted thousands of pounds in weights" – Herb Elliott*

Below is a sample week of Herb's training just before a competition period

- **Monday:** Between six and ten 440s or 880s followed by two or three miles of free running.
- **Tuesday:** Five miles flat-out on the tan course outside the Melbourne Botanical Gardens.
- **Wednesday:** Train with sprinters – a relaxation.
- **Thursday:** Thirty minutes or so of sprint-jogs. (In a sprint-jog you jog round a track, build-up speed for fifteen yards, then sprint for thirty yards, slow down and jog again, performing this routine twice in every lap.
- **Friday:** Rest
- **Saturday:** Three to six miles fiat-out on the track.
- **Sunday:** Ten miles hard.

Four years of this type of training and Elliot won the Olympic gold medal in Rome keeping the promise he made to himself in 1956 in Melbourne.



So let's have a look at Elliot against our criteria.

**Is it physical?**

Yes he was obviously born with the attributes of body type and muscle structure to allow him to achieve the ultimate.

**Is it the training methods?**

Again it is yes. His training was intense and hard work. He did what was asked of him by Percy.

There have been many coaching methods that have worked but more that haven't. The good coaches have developed the training for the individual that brings out their best attributes.

**Is it hard work?**

Yes very hard but he reaped the rewards for his commitment.

**Is it the attitude?**

Yes. He had a belief in his ability and would not accept any result but first.

There is no doubt that Elliot had a positive attitude that was nurtured by Cerutti. He believed in himself completely. He dominated his event with relentless aggression with his win at all cost approach.

**It is all of these?**

Yes it was the combination of all of these that made him the best.

If you remove any of these he may still be a good athlete but not a great one. It was the combination that made him the complete athlete.

For more on Herb Elliot see

<https://www.athletics.com.au/hall-of-fame-directory/herb-elliott/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EF2Gn6pVQTI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rMJIASS4lc>

## Ralph Doubell.



You can psyche your opponent out if you do it at the right time. Ralph Doubell while running in the semi-final of the Mexico Olympics 800 meters did this when he pulled alongside the Olympic favourite Wilson Kiprugut of Kenya in the final straight and thought to himself "you don't look good" Ralph went ahead and won the semi.

In Doubell's words of the semi (*"I was running comfortably in fourth position (but) I thought that was a bit risky, so I moved up to third, and was amazed how easy it felt. I then thought coming second might be safer, so I breezed into second place just behind Kiprugut. "Again it felt easy --- it was as though I was on a training run. Kiprugut was leading and seemed to be making heavy weather of it. I then decided to test him, and myself, by moving level with him with about 60 metres to go. This was the start of the psychological battle ... I drew level, and glanced across and indicated that I thought this seemed like an ordinary training run --- 'Can't you run a bit faster?' I then breezed by him to win by one or two metres."*)

In the final Kiprugut again went out hard and led while Ralph had a bad start. Again Ralph overtook Kiprugut in the final straight cruising past him with no apparent fight left in him.

Was Kiprugut done? Did the semi and the look convince Kiprugut that Ralph knew that he had his measure? We don't know except that Doubell won that race and collected the gold.

Going through Doubell's head as he ran for the line he kept repeating Go. Go. Go. You can do it. You can do it.

Check out Ralph Doubell's account at the link below.

<https://www.athletics.com.au/hall-of-fame-directory/ralph-doubell/>

Distance runners are playing mind games as they run. They are either battling themselves telling themselves they can do it. Or they doubt themselves and lose their drive.

### **With Doubell was it physical?**

Yes he had the attributes to run this distance.

You must be born with the correct balance of red (slow twitch) and white (fast twitch) muscle fibres for the event.

### **Was it the training methods?**

Obviously yes the training was designed for him to achieve at this level. Franz put in many hours on his conditioning and his mind-set.

### **Was it hard work?**

Yes Doubell under Franz Stampfl worked very hard (try doing 100 by 100 meter sprints in a session 50 laps of the track 20 kilometres after a 3 kilometre warm up around Princes Park. I can tell you it isn't easy. I did it with him and it was hard work.

### **Was it the attitude?**

Yes. Doubell believed in himself, he knew he could do it. Franz had spent a lot of time convincing him that he could. Even as he headed for the finish line in Mexico he kept repeating to himself. "You can do it". "You can do it". "You can do it". And he did.

## **Conclusion**

To reach the top, many elements must fall into place. All of these athletes had a common thread. They were all born with the physical attributes that would enable them to excel at the sport. They all had a drive to be the best and would not accept less. This drive enabled them to do what was needed to reach their goal and they found the right mentors to help them get there. Each trained hard but varied in what they did. This was because they had a coach that took the principles necessary to get to the top and moulded it around the mental and physical attributes of the athlete. You can look at the program of a particular athlete that you admire and copy it but it is unlikely to get you to the top, rather it is very likely to end up with injury and setback. The coach takes his or her knowledge and blends it into a structured program for the individual with minor changes where required. This program usually covers a number of years of development to bring the athlete up to the physical levels required. Each year is broken into phases designed to get to a peak at the correct time, such as a championship or national team while developing the confidence or self-belief to be a winner.

So let's look at the list again and ask yourself the questions.

### **Is it physical?**

Do you believe you have the body and muscle type for the task?

You need to be gifted by your parents with the correct body structure and muscle makeup. If you have dominant white muscle fibre you will excel in the explosive events such as sprints, jumps, throws etc. If you have dominant red fibre you will excel in the endurance events. The distance that is best for you will be the one that you have the blend of white (fast twitch) and red (slow twitch) muscle. Red gets you through the distance and white brings it home.

***I often tell new athletes not to worry about what event you want to do. Have a go at everything and the event will find you.***

### **Is it the training methods?**

Do you have a coach and a plan to reach your goal?

There have been many coaching methods that have worked but more that haven't. The good coaches have developed the training for the individual that brings out their best attributes.

### **Is it hard work?**

Are you prepared to do what it takes to get there? Few are, they quit when it gets tough. Remember the old saying when the going gets tough the tough get going. Is that you?

Winners all have all of these attributes in common but most of all they all worked hard.

### **Is it the attitude?**

Do you have the self-belief to be a winner or do you look along the start line to check on who you can't defeat?

These athletes and many others stood on the top step of the podium because they believed in themselves and believed that they belonged there.

All of these athletes had something in common. They all had coaches that worked them hard but most of all their coach imbedded in them a self-belief in their ability and a confidence that they could win against any opposition which is what they did.

### **It is all of these?**

If you are baking a cake and you leave out one of the important ingredients, the cake will be a failure.

Yes it is physical, Yes it is the training methods, Yes it is hard work, Yes it is your attitude, Yes it is all of these and more.

If your goal is to just get fit and compete at the club level then the task isn't so hard but if your goal is to be the best of the best then the road ahead is a long hard slog as you climb the ladder.

No matter what goal you set yourself the emotions you go through when you get there are worth all of the hard work and pain it took to achieve it.

**Another note worth mentioning is that Edwin Flack, Herb Elliot and Ralph Doubell all ended up at the top of their chosen profession as well.**

### **Edwin Flack**

Returning to Melbourne after completing his accountancy training he joined with his father in the company Flack and Flack the company grew to have offices in every capital by 1922. In 1946 Price Waterhouse & Co extends Flack & Flack the invitation to join the international firm. Flack & Flack accepts.

### **Herb Elliot.**

After Rome Elliot went to Harvard and completed a degree.

From May 2005, he served as deputy chairman of Fortescue Metals Group, the world's fifth largest iron ore miner by capacity, and has been the non-executive chairman of the firm since March 2007. Earlier Elliott served as the CEO of Puma North America and between 2001 and 2006 as a board member at Ansell.

### **Ralf Doubell**

After retirement from sports, Doubell enrolled at Harvard Business School. He then worked as a Head of Relationship Management and a Director and Divisional Head of Corporate and Institutional Banking of the Deutsche Bank Group in Australia. He was a Director of Telstra Stadium in Sydney until 2007.

**Is it possible that this same commitment to hard work and the total belief in themselves also took them to the top of their profession?**

In the star wars movie Luke has landed in a swamp and his ship has sunk. Yoda encourages him to use the force and lift it out, after attempting it and failing Luke gives up. Yoda encourages him to

keep going but Luke replies I can't, Yoda persisted and Luke replied I tried. Yoda replied "don't try do" and removes the ship for him.

This was a lesson in positive thinking and is used by business coaches in the power of positive thinking and how the belief in yourself (the force) can enable you to achieve great things.

**Phillip Molesworth (Level 4 coach.)**

### **Footnote.**

During the same time at Stampfl and Cerutti Across the ditch in New Zealand coach Arthur Lydiard was putting his charges through punishing training sessions and developed the 100 miles (160 kilometres) a week winter training he produced Peter Snell who won three Olympic gold medals in the 800 and 1500 metres. Using Lydiard's methods a high school teacher come coach Arch Jelley produced another great in John Walker who won Olympic gold and ran the sub 4 minute mile over 100 times.

Again we saw talented athletes achieve greatness with a program of hard work, commitment and self-belief.