



## 5 Essentials for a Winning Life Career with Jim Citrin

I wasn't sure what to expect when I put a survey in one of my past Yahoo! Finance columns, "Why Do Athletes Win at Business?" Participation was encouraging, though, with nearly 14,000 readers responding to the survey. Much of the data confirmed my view of the strong link between skills developed in sports and professional success.

For example, an overwhelming 80 percent of respondents reported that the attributes learned from playing sports are integral to the success of top executives. Moreover, in response to the question "How great of an impact have your sports experiences had on your career or on career-related skills?", more than half of the respondents said "a lot" or "extremely," while only 22 percent said "slight" or "none at all."

### **Message-Board Naysayers**

While such findings may seem incontrovertible, not everyone agrees with my thesis. Responses, in fact, were actually overwhelmingly negative. While initially disappointing, the feedback was actually thoughtful and provocative—so much so that I wanted to share and address some of the comments.

Reader Clay Bobisud makes no bones about the column being "a MAJOR crock!": "The supposed 'benefits' of sports accrue mostly to a select few high school jocks, who, due to their size and athletic prowess, tend also to be high school bullies. Since the upper reaches of American business tend to reward bullies, they fit right in. As for sports building self-esteem, again that's only for the chosen, talented few. For many of the rest of us, sports only mean failure, rejection and derision. These experiences may build 'character,' but they certainly do not build self-esteem . . . The real problem with this article is that it reinforces the jockocracy. What we need is more smart people running things, and fewer jocks."

Reader Eda Spy elaborates: "I completely agree that this column is a major crock. This is what happens when [a] columnist tries to reinforce his point of view by picking what he wants from statistical data. Out of thousands of CEOs and others who are extremely successful in their professions, I'm sure that you can find a few who were successful athletes. He then takes the names of these few athletes and crafts a story that implies correlation between these individuals' successful athletic achievements and their professional success . . . Did Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Sergey Brin participate in intercollegiate athletics? What athletic, character-building sports did Ken Lay, Jeff Skilling, the Rigas family, Sam Waksal, Bernie Ebbers, Scott

Sullivan, and the hundreds of others running companies that 'settle but admit no wrongdoing' when they get caught, play in their youth? Maybe if the columnist did some more research, he'd find a corrupting 'win at all costs' attitude instead."

## **A Love of the Game**

You may be wondering why I focused on the issue of sports and business at all.

First, I love sports, and competitive athletics have had a major influence on my personal and professional development. I've also seen several instances where sports lessons and experiences have had a very direct impact on the achievement of professional success.

For example, Christopher Liddell, the chief financial officer of Microsoft, was recruited to the software giant from the improbable post of CFO at International Paper. Chris had been a star rugby player in New Zealand as a university student, and his training played a central role in overcoming concerns about the flexibility and toughness necessary to fit in to the Microsoft culture.

## **Competition and Collaboration**

As the feedback on my survey makes clear, there's no ironclad link between athletic performance and professional success. In fact, there are precious few examples of world-class athletes who went on to become renowned business executives or professionals. However, that doesn't mean there aren't any valuable lessons to be learned and applied.

Yes, there are many ways to develop the skills and capabilities necessary to be successful in business and in life. While it's true that neither Bill Gates nor Warren Buffet was known for their athletic prowess, I don't think that it's a coincidence that they each became world-class bridge players.

Just like sports (and bridge), any number of competitive and collaborative activities—like the armed forces, theater, science fairs, dance troupes, school newspapers, and debate teams—can build valuable skills necessary for professional success.

The majority of respondents to my survey indicated that sports are important or extremely important to them (either today or when growing up). Similarly, the majority said that sports experiences had some kind of an impact, often a large one, on their career.

At the same time, the same majority described the pinnacle of their athletic career as high school varsity. To me, rather than demonstrating that sports are not valuable, this shows that you don't have to be an all-star athlete to get the lifelong benefits of sports participation.

## **Finding the Right Sport**

Saying that "the upper reaches of American business tend to reward bullies" is colorful, but the facts don't support the statement. Although it does make for an exciting headline, the fact is that most successful professionals are as focused or more focused on the success of those around them as on their own success. In time, bullies are run out of organizations.

On the point of self-esteem, research shows that, indeed, kids who are forced into the traditional sports of football, baseball, basketball, and soccer without being naturally suited to them don't enjoy themselves and tend to drop out.

However, rather than conclude that sports are therefore counterproductive for the majority of participants, I believe the real message is that people (or their parents) should look for sports that are a better fit for them. Everyone has different combinations of physical and mental aptitudes. The key is to match one's individual aptitudes with one of the hundreds of sports that rely on those strengths.

In other words, the balance and rhythm required to be a capable surfer is different from the size and strength required to play on the line in football, which is different from the agility and hand-eye coordination needed to be a natural at badminton or squash. **What's Your Sports Potential?** Is a fabulous web resource for matching your aptitude with a sport.

Finally, had Ken Lay, Jeff Skilling, the Rigas family, Sam Waksal, Bernie Ebbers, Scott Sullivan, and the long list of other fraudsters actually learned the lessons of integrity, teamwork, diligence, and commitment on the playing fields, maybe some of the disasters they perpetrated could have been avoided!

*Jim Citrin is Senior Director for Spenser Stuart, an executive search and leadership consulting firm and author of [The Dynamic Path: Access the Secrets of Champions to Achieve Greatness Through Mental Toughness, Inspired Leadership and Personal Transformation](#).*