

# Competitiveness and Achieving High

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**M**Y PARENTS told me that I was actually conceived during a bowls tour to Norfolk in the Cavendish Hotel in Great Yarmouth. Privately, my mother told me it was the best bowls tour ever – I did not venture to ask why! It could be argued therefore that perhaps I was born a competitive baby but I doubt that very much from the limited encouragement I received from my parents to take up the sport of bowls.

The Collins English Thesaurus describes 'competitive' as -

**'Aggressive, ambitious, antagonistic, at odds, combative, cut-throat, dog-eat-dog, emulous, opposing, rival, vying.'**

I was, at a very young age, aware of what motivated me. Even as a young child I always responded favourably to any challenge which 'dangled a carrot' or gave an incentive, especially if this was in the form of a prize at the end. I remember making a special project as the reward was a book token given by the Headmistress. I won... not necessarily because I was the most intelligent child but rather more determined or focussed. It was these sort of incentives which have driven me through life, in sport, in hobbies and probably throughout my career.

## IDENTIFYING A 'HIGH ACHIEVER'

Ian Maynard, Sports Psychologist of Sheffield Hallam University who played a key role in England's highly successful lawn bowls medal tally at the Manchester Commonwealth Games identified me as being in the category of a 'high achiever.' Whilst I am not sure what makes anyone a high achiever, I was once directed to an article written about understanding one's own individual threshold and how to exceed individual goals. It was through my work as Performance Director that I uncovered a plethora of articles and documentation written about 'high achievers' and one article in particular written by a world renowned 'Achievement Psychologist.' In one part of this long book there was a section which really brought 'it all home' to me; it was entitled 'Five Tips to become a high achiever.'



Tony winning Best of Breed with his Champion Dog known at home as 'Woody.'

It stated that when working on a new project, many of us reach a breaking point and give up when things start getting difficult. Recognising what makes you throw in the towel, and understanding your threshold is critical to exceeding your goals and pumping up your passion. This for me was astounding – quite by accident and certainly not by design this was exactly the way it happened for me. There were numerous activities (not necessarily sporting) that I tried, made a best effort but after a given period had decided to give up.

In my mission to find out more I read several studies of behaviour patterns of successful people – not all necessarily related to sport. Social scientists in their research concluded from various studies that when high-achievers are performing at their best, they are all able to manage what they call "flow." I remember thinking what this word 'flow' meant in this context but then concluded that it was exactly what most assumed it to be – on a roll – in the swim – on the path. Fundamentally, when bowlers are flowing there is a lost sense of time, it feels easy to perform, there is a lack of self-consciousness during the match while feeling a better sense of self afterwards and feelings of elation and contentment, almost simultaneously.

## FLOW

Not content with my interpretation of the word 'flow' I 'googled' this and it came up with the following:

***Flow is the space between anxiety, frustration and boredom. When a person is in flow they are able to access deep wells of knowledge, skill and motivation. This is when high-achievers outperform others. Your skill level in relation to the challenges you face causes anxiety and boredom when trying to accomplish your goals. When the challenge is high and the skills are low, apprehension sets in and can hamper your motivation to continue. Yet, when the challenge is low and your skills are high, you're likely to get bored and have the tendency to give up.***

This then through me slightly 'off the track' of my own self investigation and I became increasingly studious in further researching that if 'flow' is essential to a high achiever then it is an absolute 'must' for the competitive player.

The following italicised advice written for university Business Study students is so relevant when applied to the competitive bowls player to enable them to staying on track, focussed and in the flow:

**When you begin a venture, the challenge of it keeps you revved up so that you can keep on humming along at extraordinary levels. As you become more skilled, the challenge is reduced. You might feel like you're losing your edge. If you're bored, handicap yourself. For instance, time yourself while doing tasks, be more critical about quality, add a more difficult element, start another division to your company or design a new product.**

For me during my bowls career I did not set new goals within the technical application of our sport but outside of it.



**Entrepreneurs are notorious for overloading their plates. But, high-achievers have an instinctive feel for when enough is enough and they find a way to get the work done by offloading tasks. They surround themselves with people who are smarter than they are in a variety of disciplines. If you're feeling anxious, get help or take a break (you may have reached your breaking point and need a breather). Whatever you do, don't be a martyr and let the anxiety overwhelm you.**

That is the 'key' in my view - the competitive bowler rarely can 'get away from the sport' due to the action crammed competitive season. My 'breaks' were non bowls related whenever time permitted. Distancing is a great art although not a great virtue to establish a high ranking in the popularity stakes amongst peer groups. For my part, I rarely participated in protracted 'social' activities when playing competitively in team games, Commonwealth Games or world championships. I needed to distance myself by simply taking a break (albeit only an hour or two) to listen to music or to read a book in the hotel room.

**There is an interesting phenomenon that takes place when people get really, really bored. They circle back around to anxiety and find themselves trapped on a hamster wheel going nowhere. If you're feeling gnawing, unspecific anxiety and bored, it might be time to change directions entirely. It's time to rethink your life and professional goals.**

This I certainly did when I made the major decision to 'retire' from professional bowls. The hamster wheel was spinning endlessly and I knew within my own heart that I was

somewhat tired and the only road ahead was just another bowling green. It has been years since I read this but I remember the bold text as being so relevant - especially if livelihood is dependent upon it! A further interesting piece of advice is:

**Stay a little longer. Olympic Gold medallist, Peter Vidmar led the men's U.S. Olympic gymnastics team to its first team gold medal in 1984. He also scored a perfect ten to win gold on the pommel horse. He'll tell you the difference between his performance and that of his competitors' was miniscule - tenths of a point. What was his secret to edging out the other athletes? He stayed an extra 15 minutes after practise and did his routine one more time. Stay and practise a little longer and eventually it adds up to your own version of a gold medal. Read one more article, take one more class, have one more discussion or call one more prospect.**

Maybe the main ingredient in the mix to becoming a 'high achiever' is to stay on a little longer or push for that little extra bit. The great Australian TV bowler Ian Schubach was a classic 'high achiever.' He aspired to the 'dizzy heights' of world recognition as far as bowls and the BBC was concerned. Little did people realise when he did this he had been playing bowls for less than 10 years BUT then to visit Preston Guildhall (the initial home of the UK Championships) at midnight he would be found practising on the portable rink just that 'little bit longer' when the rest were sleeping.

### 'FLOW' IS ESSENTIAL TO GET TO 'THE NEXT LEVEL'

As far as I am concerned, 'flow' isn't just applicable to professional bowlers. It's for anyone who wants to get to the next level. To embark on this road of achieving is not as hard or as intellectually challenging as it might first appear.

The biggest tip must be to get to know yourself - pay attention to your emotional



Best of Breed and Best Puppy at Crufts in 2012.

state everyday and adjust your skills and challenges accordingly. Stay just a little longer while everyone else is throwing in the towel. Attempt to succeed beyond your dreams whilst being realistic about your sense of direction and pathways to achieving them.

### POSITIVES OF COMPETITIVENESS

When you have a competitive attitude, your mind would really be set towards winning. As such, you will do everything just to reach this goal (naturally I mean within the Laws of the Sport!) Consequently, you develop a positive attitude. You become more optimistic with each game you play. When you have this attitude, you will keep on making your 'good better and your better best.' In short, you will keep on reaching your goals no matter what it takes.

### NEGATIVES OF COMPETITIVENESS

On the other hand, having too much of this attitude becomes unhealthy. This holds true when you do not create (or find) a healthy or stimulating atmosphere each time you play. When you seem so competitive, you tend to guard each wrong move done, each violation made. This will make you complain right away and protest on each move done. This even worsens when you take the game on a personal level and you start to get frustrated with yourself. This happens frequently but this is totally detrimental!

In essence, having a competitive attitude can either be good or bad depending on how you make use of it. If you dwell on its positive aspects, then you will really make the most of it. However, if you seem not to dwell on its real essence and err towards negativity, you will never achieve what you are supposed to do.

Personally, whilst being a high achiever in bowls I was able to 'balance' my directional flow towards winning matches with an alternative strategy. In the latter years of my career I was able to do this by seriously pursuing my childhood interest in showing dogs (originally inspired by a distant aunt). This provided a great opportunity to 'escape' from the sport of bowls, to quench the thirst for competition away from the bowling green and in doing so allowing a return to the hubbub and demands of playing the sport at a high level.

### CRUFTS TO BITS!

Whilst I currently have a job which I thoroughly enjoy despite placing great demands upon my life, I find great respite away from the sport when either showing dogs or judging them. This year Crufts was another memorable year when my dogs received the highest accolade of all - Best of Breed and Best Puppy in Breed. My dog show days provide my 'alternative' therapy, enabling me to return to the world of bowls, motivated, focussed and always refreshed.