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The Real Deal: Competition

Jeff Thayer



Lance Armstrong (in yellow) leads the Tour de France peloton yet the true race is within. Photo Wire Image

Athletes are a unique bunch, quite unlike most people you will meet in today's society. I encourage lots of people to consider themselves everyday athletes; to treat their bodies with respect and to invest time and effort in their own health and vitality, but the final bridge to cross is the challenge of competition.

Competition is what sets athletes apart and makes them different. The rigors of self-improvement, the drive to be better, the fortitude to overcome obstacles and pit-falls, and the many sacrifices required for success - these are the characteristics found uniquely in the body and mind of the athlete.

At first blush it appears that different sports offer different competitive challenges. Obviously a boxer has a different set of challenges than a marathon runner, right? Wrong. What truly successful athletes understand is that no matter what their level of performance, the only competition that matters is the one within.

Marital artists often speak of mastering the enemy within to become invincible. Lao Tzu wrote, "He who controls others may be powerful but he who has mastered himself is mightier still." What separates Tiger Woods from the rest of the pro tour? The field is competing with Tiger and Tiger is competing with himself. When Lance Armstrong returns to the peloton, he won't be racing anyone else, he'll be racing himself.

There are many sayings meant to ease the discomfort of failure like, "it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game," or "you tried your best that's all that matters," or "the only losers are those that never try." These sayings are nothing more than excuses to accept mediocrity unless you truly have done your best, trained your hardest, and conquered your own self doubt.

Athletes who don't grasp this concept of competing within are easy to spot. They're bitter in defeat and ungracious in victory. We call them sore losers or bad winners, but these are just the obvious ones. Others seem dissatisfied with whatever the outcome, making excuses for this and that or claiming some judging, equipment, or circumstantial irregularity. Others want to make a bet about who'll come in first, or talk trash and taunt an opponent. What they don't see is that the most important contest is taking place inside, and they have already lost. If you've mastered the voice inside, overcome your own challenges, crushed self-doubt and trained hard, no one can take away your victory.

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