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Why Wrestlers Make the Best Employees

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Two wrestlers fight for a takedown. Within that takedown are many lessons that can translate into the boardroom. (Photo credit: Available_Light)

"More enduringly than any other sport, wrestling teaches self-control and pride. Some have wrestled without great skill—none have wrestled without pride." ~ Dan Gable

Today's workforce is extremely competitive. When comparing resumes it's easy to get lost in all the bullet points of software literacy and past responsibilities. If you really want to separate two seemingly qualified employees, bring them in for an interview and ask a simple question, "Have you ever participated in sports at an elite level?"

“Current research indicates that individuals who have competed in elite level athletics, i.e., collegiate, international, or professional level competition possess higher levels of emotional intelligence than their non-athlete counterparts,” says Richard Mendelson, I.O. psychologist and founder of [Dynamic IO Consultants](#), a consulting firm specializing in human capital management and other services.

In 1996, [Dr. William Brad McGonagle](#), associate vice president for administration at Texas A&M University wrote his dissertation [studying](#) how former athletes transfer the skill set they developed through athletics to the workplace. He found that an employee with prior athletic experience was able to transfer the lessons of being a team player and also noticed strengths in accomplishment-based skills, discipline, and communication.

In 2002, professors Daniel Gould and Kristen Dieffenbach published a study in the [Journal of Applied Sport Psychology](#) which noted that Olympic champions display higher levels of specific attributes directly linked to success, in particular emotional intelligence. Their research showed that these elite athletes displayed high levels of stress management, interpersonal skills, and self regard.

The conclusion of all this research could be seen during the 1972 Olympic [Games](#) in Munich, Germany, when American wrestler, Dan Gable, won the gold medal without giving up a single point! This is perhaps one of the greatest Olympic performances of all time. And while this level of performance would be hard to duplicate on any stage, can you imagine this same type of focus and determination on display in your office?

While I acknowledge that nearly all athletes at an elite level have a tremendous amount of drive, wrestlers in particular seem to operate at a higher level of fortitude. Not that my athletic history is anything to write about, but I wrestled in college and have been surrounded by amazing athletes of all sports. I’ve known Olympians, world champions, college champions and everything in between. The one constant observation is that wrestlers have a capacity to push themselves harder than most and display an unrivaled mental toughness—that and a deep desire to eat.

Socrates once said, “I swear it upon Zeus an outstanding runner cannot be the equal of an average wrestler.”

Wise words considering being fleet of foot is how a wrestler starts his day. In the business arena, being fast or strong doesn’t necessarily rank as a top priority in our service economy. So why should you care?

“Wrestling, in particular, is thought to require more individual commitment than most other sports due to the nature of the training and competing itself. The logical inference, then, is that with other sports, an athlete can go to practice or a game, and then go home to relax. Wrestlers, due to the weight class requirements, have to maintain their focus and drive around the clock for years at a time,” says Mendelson, a former college wrestler.

“In addition, wrestling is an individual sport and the athlete experiences both failure and success as an individual. As a result, the wrestler endures more physical, emotional, and psychological stress, both positive and negative, than an athlete in another sport.”

I can tell you that the biggest lesson I learned during my wrestling career was humility. Even the great Dan Gable lost a match. Over the years I learned that getting knocked down was just part of

the process to work even harder and to improve. I now encourage the success of others because I enjoy the challenge of meeting those higher expectations. Even during the all-night programming sessions to launch new features on Hitched, it has never felt difficult since I know 100 of those nights will never be as hard as a single wrestling practice.

The competitive spirit in other athletes might argue that they too exude these same qualities at the same level. They might be right, which is why the question you should pose during an interview is asking about their entire athletic background. Saying that, when the bullet points begin to once again merge as you stare down two athletes, I recommend you go with the wrestler.

"Once you've wrestled, everything else in life is easy." ~ Dan Gable
