

THE AUSTRALIAN FINANCIAL REVIEW



Professor Allan Snyder hopes the conference will add a 'permanent intellectual component to the Olympic movement'.

Photo: BELINDA PRATTEN

Brain joins Olympic brawn

Catherine Fox

Watching American television host Larry King interview boxer Mike Tyson was an eye-opener for Professor Allan Snyder.

The academic, and director of the Centre for the Mind, based at Sydney University, was surprised by Tyson's polished and articulate performance on Larry King Live. He had expected the opposite.

But Tyson, like many sports stars, has physical and mental prowess, Snyder now believes, and it is how we use our minds that distinguishes the great from the average - whether on the track, in a university or in a business.

The idea is the theme for a two-day conference Snyder is helping to organise in Sydney just before the Olympics.

It is appropriately called What Makes a Champion. A formidable array of champions - sporting and otherwise - are attending, including Nelson Mandela, Edmund Hillary, Roger Woodward, John Konrads and Herb Elliott, and a range of business executives will also be at the event, which is being sponsored by Ernst & Young and AMP.

It is part of a plan to establish a different side to the Olympics that ideally will be associated with Australia.

"The Olympic Games are the quintessential venue for the exploration

of achievement," Snyder says.

"I have a dream we can have a permanent intellectual component to the Olympic movement."

He denies the overwhelming hype for the Games could swamp the event: "It will augment it. It emphasises and sets people up to think about the mind. If Kieren Perkins comes from lane eight again and wins it gives meaning to the topic."

Unlike many academics who belittle sporting prowess, Snyder believes champions of the track and field can provide lessons on how the mind works and these can be applied in a variety of sectors. Business, in particular, can make use of such information.

Not that Snyder is a keen sports fan. "I'm not allured to sport but allured to winners," he says. "To win at anything requires something special. You are not a champion at anything without a great mind."

And, he stresses, that champion mindset can be learned.

It's not exactly a new message. The business-sport analogy has been popular for some time in a country obsessed with sport but generally seen as lacking corporate zeal. Critics believe tips from the sporting world have no place in the business realm and the comparison is wildly inappropriate. Snyder is aware of these arguments but maintains that the mind of a champion athlete has some characteristics that are

worth exploring in detail.

"I suspect the Olympics will see those we thought would win won't, and those we never expected to will," he says.

"It's so clear that what makes a champion is a champion mindset and it's a transferable quality and not the skills itself.

"The idea that these people are just jocks is wrong. Most practise enormous mental discipline".

Snyder says the genesis of the idea for a symposium came from a chat to the Prime Minister, John Howard, a year or so ago about the future of the country.

"The greatest nations of the future will be those that export their

"You are not a champion without a great mind."

knowledge industries. Australia is highly innovative but it isn't enough to be just innovative. You must be perceived as an innovative country," he says. "If we can have Australia initiate this permanent intellectual component to the Olympic Games, we would be branded as an innovative country."

Howard agreed that Australia was associated more with sporting prowess and beaches than innovation and agreed to be patron of the movement. The response has been enthusiastic - especially from the business sector.

"What could be more fun than understanding the ingredients of being successful. Business...already have great people and they respond most to the message," Snyder says.

He offers a few of the tips he believes apply to the corporate world.

Champions, for example, expand their boundaries and push limits. They challenge the status quo. They regularly face adversity and triumph. Skill, Snyder insists, is just a building block.

"You don't want to keep practising your expertise but improve your technique. Your expertise should be executed almost unconsciously," he says.

Snyder says swimmer Kieren Perkins is a good example of the premis. He barely made the trials and was able to make the Olympic team by "pulling out a win". That result was as much about mindset as swimming skill.

There are also important lessons to be learned from failure and the drive to win at all costs, which is why Poppy King is among the champions listed for the event.

It is this overwhelming desire to push the limits that tempts even top athletes to use any method - including drugs - to get to the top.

"I want to be the first to admit I recognise champions live at the boundaries of the frontier," Snyder says.

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