

Rowdy's Traits for Success

In his keynote address at the TeamStrength Leadership Workshop 2016, Olympian Rowdy Gaines shared the five words he felt were most crucial in his journey to becoming a champion.

First, he spoke of **commitment**. Rowdy says life is a roller coaster with peaks and valleys, and it is the valleys that define you and provide the most learning.

He shared his personal example of the high of setting the world record in swimming on April 1, 1980. As Rowdy reminded us, swimmers don't have a World Series or annual championship to strive for. The true pinnacle for a swimmer is the Olympics. Our President announced we would boycott the Olympic Games on April 2, 1980. All at once, Rowdy's four-year journey toward his goal of being an Olympian was over.

Rowdy says he quit swimming for a time, then recommitted to the goal after a conversation with his father. Rowdy worked 6 days a week, 4-7 hours a day, swimming 10 miles each day. He swam 24,000 miles total which is the circumference of the planet at the equator to train for a race that lasted less than 50 seconds. That's commitment. He says every mile was worth it.

Rowdy's next message was about pursuing **originality**. He said you can be a leader or a follower and encouraged us to choose to be a leader. He talked about pioneering a new racing start for swimmers after the false start rule changed in 1982. Prior to that, swimmers were allowed two false starts with no penalty and Rowdy false-started a lot. He needed a new approach, and developed a new start position similar to a track start, with one foot forward and the back leg bent. He introduced the start at 1982 World Championship, where his back foot slipped, his start was a belly-flop and he finished 8th out of 8.

He worked on perfecting the start for the next two years, vowing to be the last one out of the water each day. At the end of each workout, he's practice the start after everyone else got out. It paid off, as his exceptionally fast start played a key role in his gold medal 100-meter free race in 1984.

And the start he pioneered is still being used today.

Next, Rowdy encouraged us to embrace **risk-taking**. Never be afraid to fail, he said. He told the story of David Berkoff, a backstroke swimmer with an exceptional underwater kick off the start and turns. David employed this 'Berkoff Blastoff' further than any other backstroke swimmer ever had, and this risk paid off with Olympic gold.

He also told the story of Rulon Gardner, a farm boy from Idaho who made it to the Olympics in Greco-Roman wrestling. Rulon was pitted for the gold against a Russian wrestler who had never lost a match in 13 years – and in fact had never given up a single point. In their gold medal match, Gardner separated his opponent's hands just a little bit, earning one point. He won the gold – 1 to nothing.

Championship wins happen in fractions of seconds or inches. Rowdy says you have to be willing to take risks to get that tiny margin of victory.

Rowdy also pursued **virtuosity** throughout his swimming career. His goal was to do it better than anyone else, and that required focus day after day... and a lot of repetition. Rowdy explained that you must place a very high value on the work and want to accomplish your goals no matter how hard it is. Rowdy would remind himself every day that the last few strokes of each workout were just as important as the first few.

Finally, Rowdy stressed the importance of **teamwork**. Rowdy won 3 gold medals, and says he gave one to his mom, one to his dad, and one to his coach, because he couldn't have done it without their support. He says he wished he'd won 40 gold medals so he could have given one to every team mate. Because they were all committed to each other.

He said the team aspect was critical even for an individual sport like swimming. Rowdy reminded us - You are most successful with the mutual support of a team.

Commitment, originality, risk-taking, virtuosity and teamwork are all elements of Rowdy's road to becoming an Olympic gold medalist. These traits are also found in great leaders, like TeamStrength members. This month I'll ask our member CEOs and executives to reflect on these five ideals, and consider how they can better put these to use in their own road to success.

I hope you'll all watch the Summer Olympics this month, and hear from Rowdy personally as he announces the swimming competition for NBC. Gain inspiration from the athletes, and take this into your professional life with dedication, new ideas, taking chances, striving to be the best and connecting to your team.