

Through the Lens #13 — Summer 2013

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What Does it Take to Make a Champion?

While on a short winter vacation in Florida this year, we had the good fortune to stay in an apartment next to that of the head Olympic swimming coach for Canada—Benoit Lebrun. He asked us to call him Ben. He often came to the area with his athletes, for the wonderful pools and biking opportunities it afforded. Our two families became a bit acquainted.

Meeting him, I remembered a question one of my Bowen family systems coachesⁱ had posed during an Olympic year, when I was still early in my training at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. “Are Olympic athletes more motivated from their families or from within self?”

Every 4 years since then, when the Olympic games rolled around the same question would surface in my mind. But I had never resolved it to my satisfaction. On the one hand, those of us in the supervision group where the question was first asked, all understood how very important the togethernessⁱⁱ pull of the family relationship system is in who we finally become, what we like and do. On the other, the individuality forceⁱⁱⁱ (differentiation force) is strong, too—the factor within that is determined solely by what we have thought through for ourselves—perhaps just as strong as the togetherness force. One year I might come up with one answer. And then, 4 years later at Olympic time, another! So it wasn't surprising that the question popped up for me, fully formed, on first making Ben's acquaintance.

I finally found the right time to ask this busy man if he would be available for an interview. He agreed, and after explaining to him the history of my many years'-long dilemma, I dived right in. So the following is my remembrance of how it went.

RG: Ben, do you have any thoughts on whether family motivation or self-motivation is more important in the making of an Olympiad?

Ben: Absolutely I do. Without question, the most important motivation for the top athletes comes from within self. For example, I had a young teenager apply for training only last week. I always bring the family along with the applicant for the first interview. So, I asked her, “Why do you want me to coach you?” I was trying to get at exactly what you have brought up—what and/or who was/were motivating her.

She and her family were prepared to move to Montreal, where I work, if she was accepted by me. She explained that she had always, from the time she was a small child, wanted to compete in the Olympic games. Her local coach recently told her that he had gone as far as he could with her and if she was serious about becoming an Olympic athlete, she needed to train with me. “So, that is why I am here,” she said.

Next, I turned to her family and asked them a similar question. “What do you think about this—it would be a big move for you.” They answered, “Well, if that is what she wants to do, we are in support of her. We will do whatever we can to assist her” It was a perfect interview.

Had they said, “We have always hoped for an Olympic athlete in the family,” or “We have Olympic athletes in our family and we hoped she would continue the tradition,” or any number of other responses, the interview would not have been exactly what I was looking for in a top athlete. But since the applicant and the family both

agreed that the athletic motivation for her was coming solely from her, I was very pleased. She was accepted for training.

In fact, I coach the parents of the young athletes not to get overly involved emotionally in the training or competitions. I do want them to show up for all the competitions, but only to show up. I don't want them to be overly invested in how the athletes are doing. It is, after all, their kids' show, not that of the parents. The parents need to keep themselves under control and somewhat in the background.

RG: That is very interesting, because we in Bowen family systems theory, coach parents in a similar way on life issues. We believe that emotional over-involvement in their children's lives, not only athletically, but in general, can lead to sub-optimal outcomes for the children. Being there, and having a solid connection, though, we also see as important.

Ben: Interestingly, there are some pretty good athletes where the motivation clearly is coming from the family. But as I have observed the 2 groups of athletes over the years, the more family-motivated ones never do as well as those who are motivated from within themselves.

RG: That is fascinating. Well, what, then do you think it takes to make a champion swimmer?

Ben: Ten thousand hours.

RG: Just like the book says, in *The Outliers*, by Malcolm Gladwell?

Ben: Yes, just like the book says—ten thousand hours in the pool.

RG: So, how long does that take?

Ben: It takes ten years to make a champion,

RG: Whoa! And what does that break down to on a daily basis?

Ben: It breaks down to 4 hours a day, 6 days a week.

RG: That is dedication.

Ben: It is, and that is what it takes—that kind of dedication.

RG: Thanks, Ben. You've given me lots to think about.

Ben: My pleasure.

ⁱ Kathleen Kerr

ⁱⁱ Togetherness, one of the basic ideas in Bowen family systems theory, posits that we are all pulled, to different degrees of balance, by two forces, the togetherness and the individuality forces. Togetherness is synonymous with the family fusions, where self is sacrificed or taken on in the family relationship system, to different degrees in different families and individuals.

ⁱⁱⁱ Individuality is the force that balances against the togetherness force. It is the force to become who/what we want to be, independent of the family pull on us to be there for it/them. The balance of the two forces is different in different individuals and accounts for differing levels of emotional maturity in different people.