



Greatness

The 16 Characteristics of True Champions

by Don Yaeger
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240 pages

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Take-Aways

- Greatness has four key elements: How great people think, prepare, live and approach their work – or with athletes, their sport.
- Subtle differences distinguish truly great performances from merely good ones.
- To do great things, embrace an enthusiastic attitude; positive thinking improves results.
- Greatness means you are always ready to take chances and you never, ever quit. Set an example and inspire everyone.
- During tough times, great people derive strength from their faith.
- Preparation enables great performers to focus and win, despite any hardship.
- Great performers use every available minute to practice and improve.
- Elite performers set a clear goal mentally and visualize reaching or beating it.
- Greatness often depends on being willing and able to change your game plan.
- Greatness is never about the money. Great people live their lives for others, not for themselves. Live your life so you can be proud of your legacy.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
6	6	6	7

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) What comprises greatness, and 2) How champion athletes embody the 16 primary characteristics of greatness.

Recommendation

For more than two decades, journalist Don Yaeger, a former *Sports Illustrated* editor, had a front-row seat for observing greatness at sports fields, boxing rings, basketball courts, Olympic swimming pools and racing tracks: wherever great athletes competed. Yaeger spent hundreds of hours discussing greatness with elite sports performers. In his solid exploration of how to achieve greatness, Yaeger draws on the inspirational lives and character traits of great athletes. This is great fun – if not exactly great literature – and filled with triumphant stories. *getAbstract* recommends Yaeger’s insights to athletic adolescents and anyone who loves sports (particularly US sports, given the terminology) and who wants to learn about the personalities of champions.

Summary

Greatness

Everyone can cite an example of greatness, but defining it isn’t easy. Those seeking illustrations of greatness know that it often manifests in the world of sports.

Small, subtle differences separate the world’s greatest athletes from their rivals. Those tiny margins spell the difference between levels of greatness. For instance, during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, Usain Bolt beat Michael Johnson’s 1996 world-record time in the 200-meter event by only 0.02 seconds. In 2010, during the Butler University vs. Duke University National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men’s basketball championship game, Gordon Hayward failed to make a basket from half court with his last-second buzzer shot. If the ball had struck the backboard one inch to the side, he would have made it, and Butler would have won.

Research concerning the world’s greatest athletes shows that longer practice, superior stamina and sustained effort distinguish true champions. Such research suggests that anyone can become great through exceptional, concentrated and sustained exertion. “You have to be willing to do things the masses would never do,” says Steve Bisciotti, owner of the Baltimore Ravens of the National Football League (NFL). Greatness imposes hard choices and unending sacrifice. But greatness in others can inspire greatness in you.

It’s in You

Greatness has nothing to do with genetics. Consider any two athletes of the same size, speed, strength and athletic ability. One will consistently outperform the other. Invariably, the better performer has superior drive and more determination, practices longer hours, and works harder to be great. No one becomes great by taking shortcuts. Greatness is not related to records or winning, or even fame.

The 16 Traits that Define Greatness

Greatness has everything to do with individual character. It involves four key elements: how great people think, prepare, live and approach their work – or with athletes, their

“Greatness should be more than just a philosophy or strategy. It should dictate our choices and impact our actions.”

“If you are ever to achieve greatness, you must realize that the highest level of success can never be accomplished alone.”

“Every time you make the right choices you are encouraging others around you to do the same.”

“Doing unto others is perhaps the simplest thing we can do on our way to being truly great.”

“When all else fails, the truly great know how and when to adjust their game.”

“Greatness of any kind requires hard word and dedication – not only to the final goal, but to the process of attaining it.”

sport. Becoming great is a deliberate, conscious, personal commitment. It infuses every aspect of a great person’s life.

Sixteen primary concepts and character traits define greatness:

1. **“It’s personal”** – As a young man, Jimmy Connors was the greatest tennis player in the world. But in 1991, at age 38, Connors had to earn a wild-card spot to play in the US Open. His first-round opponent was Patrick McEnroe (younger brother of John McEnroe), who was 25 and a top-10 player. In the first two sets, Connors came up empty. Ahead 3-0 in the third set, McEnroe did not take Connors seriously. The younger player made a big mistake. “He yawned.” This infuriated Connors. “I am not going to let that kid beat me,” he promised himself. Connors raised his game and won in five sets, becoming the oldest person to compete in the US Open semifinals. The greatest competitors detest losing.
2. **“Rubbing elbows”** – University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) basketball coach John Wooden had great players on his teams, including Bill Walton and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. But one of his favorite players was a relative unknown, Swen Nater. Wooden recruited the seven-foot Nater to practice daily against Walton and to help Walton improve his game. Nater seldom came off the bench during matches. When Walton graduated and became the first pick in the National Basketball Association (NBA) draft, sportswriters asked him to name the greatest player he had competed against. “Swen Nater,” he said. You can become great when others push you to be your best.
3. **“Believe”** – Sandy Koufax was one of Major League Baseball’s greatest pitchers. In 1963, he was the National League’s Most Valuable Player (MVP), and he won the annual Cy Young Award as the year’s best pitcher. So it should have been Koufax who took the mound for the first game of the 1965 World Series. But Game One was scheduled on Yom Kippur, the Jewish calendar’s most significant holiday. Koufax’s faith meant more to him than baseball. The Dodgers’ ace pitcher told his coaches he could not pitch Game One. Instead, he spent his day honoring his religion by attending synagogue. Great performers have a strong belief in a power greater than themselves. Their faith gives them strength in tough times. (And Koufax won the Cy Young again in 1965 and 1966).
4. **“Contagious enthusiasm”** – During the 1973 Major League Baseball season, the New York Mets started out strong, but a host of injuries struck the team. By July, the Mets had a 33-42 win-loss record, an embarrassment to the formerly high-flying team. Mets pitcher Tug McGraw began to inspire his teammates with the rousing call, “Ya gotta believe!” This became the Mets’ slogan and theme for the rest of the season. Believing took the Mets all the way to the last game of the World Series. People can do great things when they embrace a positive, enthusiastic attitude.
5. **“Hope for the best, but...”** – Coach John Wooden always used the same routine to introduce freshmen to UCLA basketball practice: He told the new players to remove their shoes and socks and then carefully instructed them on exactly how to pull on their socks and lace up their shoes. “If there are wrinkles in your socks, or your shoes aren’t tied properly, you will develop blisters,” Wooden told his players. “With blisters, you’ll miss practice. If you miss practice, you don’t play. And if you don’t play, we cannot win.” Great performers pay attention to the smallest detail and prepare with care for every contingency. Their preparation enables them to focus on performing and gives them the best opportunity to come out on top.

“Recognize the value first of a personal investment of self...never think you can get ahead by letting someone else do the work... [invest in yourself] by continually seeking out new areas of proficiency, competence and skill.”

“The great ones understand that life needs to have another dimension; it needs to not only reach up, but to reach out.”

“Like it or not, there is always someone watching.”

“Fear and failure often walk hand in hand.”

6. **“What off-season?”** – During his storied career, Olympic gold-medal winner Michael Phelps worked constantly to become the world’s greatest swimming champion. He never rested a single day and even worked out on holidays. “We figured there’s 52 weeks in a year; if [other] people are taking a day off every week, that’s 52 more workouts we have on them,” said Phelps. Great performers use every minute available to them to get better at what they do.
7. **“Visualize victory”** – Many consider Ted Williams to be the greatest hitter in baseball history. Williams was famous for using visualization to perfect his famous swing. “I used to take a heavy bat and swing it until I couldn’t swing it anymore, always hitting at an imaginary pitch and visualizing what I would do with it,” he once explained. Sports psychologists stress the importance of visualization – setting a clear goal in your mind and imagining yourself achieving or surpassing that goal. This is exactly how Howard Schultz helped transform Starbucks from a small coffee operation in Seattle to its dominant position in the retail coffee-shop industry today.
8. **“Inner fire”** – Warrick Dunn, one of the NFL’s greatest running backs, never had it easy. The oldest of six children raised by a single mother, Dunn won a football scholarship to Florida State University (FSU). Then a criminal shot and killed his mother. FSU coach Bobby Bowden told Dunn he could back out of his commitment, but Dunn knew his mother would want him to move ahead with his life. Dunn went to FSU while working hard to raise his brothers and sisters over the phone and assisting his grandmother who lived with the children. Dunn would often fly home to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to help out. He went on to have a great NFL career, becoming only the 22nd NFL player ever to rush more than 10,000 yards. Despite hardship, great people find a way to succeed.
9. **“Ice in their veins”** – Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Favre had one of the best careers in the NFL, including a Super Bowl win and 11 Pro Bowl honors. He holds numerous NFL passing records, including those for most touchdowns and most interceptions. A fearless gunslinger, Favre was never afraid to gamble. He took tremendous risks, winning with many of his high throws and losing with almost as many. Great performers never fear failure. Thomas Edison tried 586 different approaches before his electric light worked correctly. Greatness means you are always willing to take chances and never, ever quit.
10. **“When all else fails”** – Tennis great Andre Agassi built his career on his superaggressive attacking game. He relied on difficult, “sharp-angled shots” to overpower his rivals. This worked when Agassi became a professional in 1986 and during the first few years of his highly successful career. By 1997, however, Agassi was played out. He plunged from No. 1 to No. 122 in the world rankings. Agassi revamped his game, relying more on tactics and less on power. This transformation fueled his return to the top. Despite his age, Agassi reached No. 6 in the world. Greatness often depends on being willing and able to change your game plan.
11. **“The ultimate teammate”** – In 1971, linebacker Mike Flynt was a captain of his Sul Ross State University football team. Flynt was an incredibly tough competitor. Unfortunately, he was as likely to get in a fight off the football field as on it. After one too many fights, his coaches kicked Flynt out of the team, and he did not play during his senior season. Without Flynt’s fiery leadership, his teammates performed poorly. He felt guilty for three decades about letting his team down. To set things right, Flynt enrolled in Sul Ross State at age 59, tried out for the team, made it and “suited up for the Lobos once again.” During the season, he led his new teammates,

“The truly great press on toward the next goal because it is that extra effort, that nonstop push toward something better, that can make the difference between good and great.”

“The simple truth is that greatness never, ever stands still.”

“Your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.” (coach John Wooden)

“A pattern... developed over my career that you have to kill me to beat me.” (tennis champion Jimmy Connors)

now as a mentor and wise adviser, not as a fighter. Greatness depends on seeing your flaws and on building solid teamwork.

12. **“Not just about the Benjamins”** – The New England Patriots’ Tom Brady is one of the NFL’s greatest quarterbacks. A three-time Super Bowl winner, Brady was voted NFL MVP in 2007. Unlike many NFL players, Brady has been willing to sign smaller contracts during his career – and earn less money – to ensure that his beloved Patriots would have more money to sign top players. “I’d rather win and have great players around me than make a little more,” Brady says. Greatness is never about the money you can earn. If you focus solely on money, you can never be great.
13. **“Do unto others”** – Roberto Clemente was a legendary outfielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates. During his exemplary career, Clemente had 3,000 hits, an amazing achievement. He also became known for his work helping the less fortunate. In 1972, an enormous earthquake struck Nicaragua, devastating Managua, the nation’s capital. Clemente flew to Nicaragua to offer assistance. On route, his plane crashed, and he died. The world lost a great athlete and humanitarian. Many great people live their lives for others, not for themselves.
14. **“When no one is watching”** – Dick Hoyt and his son Rick compete in marathons and triathlons as a team, with Dick carrying Rick on his bike, pushing Rick in a wheelchair or pulling Rick in a dinghy. Rick has cerebral palsy. When he was born, doctors advised Dick and his wife to institutionalize their son. They refused. When Rick was 12, he began to use a specialized computer to spell out words. A few years later, Rick asked Dick to enter them in a charity race, with Dick pushing Rick’s wheelchair. After the race, Rick wrote on his computer: “Dad, when we’re running I don’t feel like I’m paralyzed anymore.” Team Hoyt began competing in endurance contests across America. They never win, but they always finish. Over the years, Dick and Rick have demonstrated true greatness, not to achieve fame, but to show their love for each other. Greatness never needs an audience.
15. **“When everyone is watching”** – In 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first African-American to play in Major League Baseball. He played for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Branch Rickey, the team’s general manager, told Robinson that almost no one would be on his side. “We can win only if we can convince the world that I’m doing this because you’re a great ballplayer, a fine gentleman,” Rickey told Robinson. The newest Dodger did just that, performing as an exemplary role model during his entire splendid career. Greatness sets an example for and inspires everyone.
16. **“Records are made to be broken”** – Ted Williams was not just a great baseball slugger but also a great pilot. During World War II, he trained other pilots. During the Korean War, he flew 38 combat missions. The five years that Williams spent in the US military made it impossible for him to break various batting records, but he didn’t care. Williams realized that someone would always break someone else’s record. He cared more about serving his country. Don’t worry about trifling honors. Live your life so you can be proud of your legacy.

About the Author

Don Yaeger, an associate editor at *Sports Illustrated* for 10 years, is a journalist and the author of numerous books, including *Running for My Life*, which he co-wrote with Warrick Dunn.