The Science of Excellence

Randy Borum, University of South Florida
The Science of Excellence

Developing mental skills can improve any martial artist's performance, whether you're a beginner or an expert. But the competitive edge is most significant at the elite levels of competition, where fractions of a second and fractions of a point determine the winners.

Elite athletes are generally defined as those who compete professionally or on national or international teams. This designation suggests that the person has acquired a high level of expertise in his sport. Expertise is a topic of great interest to sports psychologists. What creates expertise? Research shows that there are four key factors.

**Deliberate practice:** Training and practice facilitate expertise only when certain conditions are met. It's true that expert martial artists probably practice more than novices, but achieving optimal results requires quality, not just quantity. For practice to produce maximum benefits, you must be motivated to attend to the task and work actively to improve. It's also critical that you receive specific and immediate feedback about your performance and that the same or similar tasks be repeated frequently. Practice may not count when you're just bouncing with a beat, singing along, running through the day's to-do list in your head. Deliberate practice requires that you maintain focus, monitor and modify your behaviors, and really work to improve your skill.

**High-level coaching:** Martial artists who want to be the best often seek out the best instructors. Expert coaches tend to have higher levels of domain-specific knowledge, and they plan and structure practice sessions more carefully. With regard to martial arts knowledge, instructors at the elite level have in-depth knowledge of the tactical, technical and general aspects of the art and can adjust the instruction to your needs and skill level. If you're more advanced, they can spend a greater portion of their time discussing tactical instruction rather than reviewing the fundamentals.

**360-degree athlete monitoring:** It typically takes much more than desire to build an elite martial artist. It requires a systematic and continuous assessment of all domains of human performance and the resources to meet the athlete's needs. The sport of mixed martial arts, for example, is generating more and more professional fighters, but many of them and their schools aren't prepared to support elite-level training.

Consider the U.S. Olympic Training Center or the Australian Institute of Sport. These institutions have created an infrastructure to nurture excellence with the

Achieving excellence in the martial arts depends on a number of factors, not just how good your front kick and reverse punch are. (For illustrative purposes, Olympic taekwondo silver-medalist Nia Abdallah is shown.)
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About the author: Dr. Randy Borum is a professor at the University of South Florida. He's also a certified sports psychologist. For more information, visit www.blackbeltmag.com/archive/who/

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