

Building a better working world with help from the world of sport

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Talent, tenacity and a keen focus on high-quality results. Those are the first attributes that come to mind when I think about what it takes to build a high-performing team, whether it's in sport or business.

At EY, we're always looking for strong players to complement our teams and help us fulfill our purpose of building a better working world. That's why we're adding elite athletes to our ranks.

The EY Women Athletes Business Network (WABN) and espnW surveyed 400 women executives from around the globe and found that 94% of them played sports. An additional 61% said sporting involvement had contributed to their career success.

At EY, we wanted to see what would happen if we helped them get a jump on their careers. Would the skills and experience they gained on the playing field translate into marketable leadership skills in the workplace?

We believed they would and, hypothesis in hand, we made the investment, hiring nine Olympians from six countries as interns in 2016. All of them are women who competed in the Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Athlete Career Transition (ACT) Ltd., an organization that recruits and places athletes in global business environments, scoured the globe to help us find the right candidates. Founded by retired Welsh International Rugby Union players and brothers Andy and Steve Moore, ACT tailored a structured support system for each athlete, which helped facilitate a seamless transition into the internship program.

The interns' business experience varied, from recent graduates to one with a successful legal career under

her belt. But they all had one thing in common: a desire to succeed.

Tackling new challenges with confidence

Olympic fencer Nzingha Prescod is ranked second in the US for her sport, but the internship was her first foray into business. She approached it the same way she did her early days of fencing. "It's that same kind of energy of proving yourself," she said.

Nzingha said her self-confidence is high, "even when I'm wrong, which is a lot. I feel like I have the confidence that I can get to the level of my peers and beyond."

The confidence and intense focus that enabled her to become a champion fencer helped her acclimate to our Performance Improvement Advisory practice in New York City, where our sport is data and analytics, said Dan Diasio, Principal, Ernst & Young LLP.

"I was interested to see if that motivation would translate into a part of the business that she didn't know as well. What we've seen is it absolutely has," Dan said. "There are a lot of different types of challenges that our team is throwing at her and that she seems to be tackling as if she's been practicing for years and years."

Like all elite athletes, Australian Olympic rower Kim Brennan thrives on challenges. She medaled three times, including a gold in the women's single sculls during the Rio Olympics. But she's also a skilled attorney who was looking to surmount another challenge in IT Advisory.

"Probably one of my best strengths is I can learn fast, because I don't see criticism or feedback as negative. I see it as a real positive," said Kim, who works in our Canberra, Australia, office.

"I want to get better and I want to learn, and I think that's something sport teaches you," she said, "that feedback is the best thing you could hope for, because that's what's going to help make you better."

Good coaching is just as important off the field

Although these athletes are the best in the world at their sport, this extreme focus and discipline can make their transition a bit bumpy. Olympians have told us they need support as they think through their next steps. The intern program gives them a chance to harness their leadership skills and apply them to the business world.





We knew it would be important to provide good coaches who would help them adapt and offer feedback and guidance. So we paired all the interns with mentors, counselors and peer advisors.

Dan chose Mikhail Chrestkha, Manager, Advanced Analytics, to be Nzingha's career counselor. "He has the uncanny ability to identify and leverage a person's strengths to give them confidence to tackle and grow into new responsibilities," he said.

They didn't treat her with kid gloves but matched her strengths – preparedness and attention to detail – to the right assignment. "We put a lot of time and effort into engagement selection," Mikhail said. "She really hit the ground running."

The interns completed EY's onboarding program for experienced hires, but ACT remains involved.

"We have a sports performance psychologist and career transition expert who helps the athletes work through issues like identity," Steve Moore said.

"They go from competing at the Olympics in front of thousands of people, and with millions watching on television, to working in a corporate office environment. What does your identity look like, and how do you cope with that kind of change?"

Before jumping into our Americas Advisory Acquisitions team in New York City, US Olympic rower Grace Luczak traveled to Atlanta for a week of orientation and development classes, introducing her to the firm and the world of consulting.

"Teaming, skill development and presentation skills were the focus development areas of the program, and it was fantastic!" Grace said. She developed a network of friends who shared helpful EY resources and the latest on blockchain, as well as new places to explore in New York City.

Our offices enjoyed having an Olympian among them, but it was important to treat them like any other EY intern, said Matt Cohen, Associate Director,

Ernst & Young LLP, Americas Advisory Acquisitions. Grace worked alongside him in New York.

"We wanted her to have a terrific opportunity to learn about our team, our process and the broader firm," he said.

Derek Gustafson, Partner, Ernst & Young LLP, the firm's Mergers & Acquisitions Leader – Americas Advisory, said Grace was paired with Matt to keep her plugged into what everyone was working on and to find ways she could help.

"Strong communications skills play a role in Grace being a world-class athlete, and we see this come through in how she executes our projects," Derek said. "She teams very well and has a great work ethic."

Athletes know how to work as a team

Grace attributed her work ethic to her athletic experience, which taught her to be task- and goal-oriented and an effective team player. The world record holder and three-time world champion calls rowing the quintessential team sport.

At the Rio Games, she competed in a pair – a two-person boat, where being on the same page is essential. "While it's important to take ownership of your own performance, you really have to be attuned with your teammate to get the most out of them as well," she said.

The same can be said for business. We're in an era of disruption, where companies are facing highly complex problems that traditional approaches may not fix. It's important to maximize diverse skills and perspectives to execute and win. Team sports prepare athletes to work in such a disrupted environment.

EY's team atmosphere is part of what Dutch Olympic rower Wianka van Dorp liked most about working with us. She joined our Advisory Content and Channel Strategy team in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and created a web-based magazine to chronicle the interns.

"I want to work in an organization where people are willing to work and get the best out of themselves and out of the team," she said. "I think that's something that reflects the people within EY and the culture very well. That's the reason that I feel at home here."

What's good for sport is good for business

At EY, we believe that our diversity is our strength, and the Olympic athlete internship program has enabled us to see firsthand the success that comes from bringing together people with varying experience.

Over six months, the interns have impressed their managers and added value to their teams. Several are joining EY as full-time employees. Their success has inspired us to broaden our recruitment to add even more athletes to our roster.

ACT will continue to oversee our recruitment efforts, this time vetting women and men from the world's top sports organizations, including the British & Irish Lions rugby players.

As with our pilot program, the goal will be for these new athletes to become full-time employees who bring unique skill sets to our high-performing teams.

Our decision to further support athletes in their transition to business careers is part of our commitment to secure top talent, develop purpose-driven leaders and build a better working world for our clients, people and communities. We're always exploring new and innovative ways to find and retain the best talent.

The drive, discipline and dedication that athletes exhibit all contribute to their career success. Companies that overlook this talent pool are missing out. The success of EY's WABN intern program demonstrates the tremendous opportunity our organization and others have in harnessing elite athletes' leadership potential. We're looking forward to bringing more athletes on board.

Why? Because their skills and experience will enhance our diversity, contribute to our bottom line and help bring our purpose of building a better working world to life. ■