

## What Makes an Olympic Athlete?

As the 2008 Beijing Olympics draw closer, the spotlight falls on the athletes who will be competing on the sports world's biggest stage in another edition of the Summer Olympic Games. While we all watch in awe as these athletes ply their trades and do things that most of us can only dream of, it's important to remember the dedication and determination involved in becoming an Olympic level athlete. You will only be even more impressed by these great individuals when you come to understand what it takes for them to reach the Olympic Games.

One important thing to keep in mind is that no one just becomes an Olympic athlete. You can't simply make it to the highest level of competition on natural talent alone. Every last athlete competing in each edition of the Olympics is successful based upon not only natural talent and ability, but years of hard work, preparation and planning. Since the Olympics only come every four years, athletes will have to train for several years just to get one opportunity to be the best in the world at their sport of choice.

If you think about it, that's an incredible amount of sacrifice with no guaranteed reward at the end. An injury, a poor performance that keeps an athlete from qualifying for the Olympics, or any other number of things can happen that will render an athlete's years of hard work and dedication effectively useless. Imagine dedicating your entire life to one goal, only to know that a single slip-up, mishap, or poor performance could erase all that you have worked for! This is the kind of pressure that Olympic level athletes must live with.

Although some Olympic athletes, such as basketball players, are professionals, most are not. This means that many Olympic athletes are students or must maintain jobs while training full-time to be the best in the world. It would not be possible, especially with the requirements of today's top athletes, if it weren't for sponsors. Most athletes rely on sponsors to help pay for strength and conditioning coaches and other needs, as well as to help pay for living expenses so that they can focus solely on their training.

Depending on the sport that the athlete participates in, they may have a very different background in their sport. As mentioned earlier, many Olympic basketball players are professional athletes, while top gymnasts are amateurs who are sometimes barely teenagers! Olympic athletes come in all ages, shapes and sizes, and from all different kinds of backgrounds. Some athletes are college competitors, and others are athletes who sharpened their skills on the college stage and have continued to train for a chance at Olympic greatness, deferring the start of their careers and families in the process.

While the demands and risks that are imposed upon athletes who dream to be in the Olympic Games are great, for these men and women, the potential rewards are well worth it. It takes a special person to dedicate themselves so completely to a singular goal, and even though many of us would love nothing more than to be given an Olympic gold medal, only a select few are willing to truly dedicate themselves to accomplishing the task.

Why is it that some athletes are able to devote themselves to the pursuit of Olympic excellence, while others can not? Perhaps Olympic athletes are simply more competitive, and their drive helps separate them from other top athletes. After all, at the highest levels of sport, the difference between a gold medal winner and a non-Olympic qualifier can be as simple as who wants to win more. One thing is for sure, though: Olympic athletes are a very special breed of individual. Although Olympic athletes are known and revered mostly for what their bodies can do, the best of them know that the work all begins in their minds and hearts.

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