



THE RACE TO THE TOP:

HALL-OF-FAME OLYMPIAN MICHAEL JOHNSON
COACHES GROWTH ON AND OFF THE TRACK

—

FEBRUARY 2021



POWERED BY
NUTANIX[™]



Michael Johnson isn't exactly familiar with losing. Holding four Olympic gold medals and eight World Championships gold medals under his belt, he's become an expert at knowing what it takes to excel, and he has carried that knowledge over to his own business, Michael Johnson Performance.

Known for his unique racing style and undefeated record on the track, Johnson has carried what he has learned through his wins into the boardroom, recognizing the unique talents of his own employees while fostering growth through example. From his time as an athlete, he learned that individual ability is something to be nurtured—not changed to fit a certain mold.

"Just because it's different doesn't mean that it's flawed," Johnson echoed wise words from his former coach Clyde Hart in a recent Cloud Counsel episode. The same sentiment applies to his employees, noting that all individuals have their own style of learning and working, and the responsibility of a leader to encourage personal growth as well as team growth.

For Johnson, what's most important is moving toward a unified goal—but getting to that same place doesn't have to look the same for everyone.

The North Star Analogy

From his time as a relay race sprinter, Johnson notes that teamwork doesn't necessarily always occur off the field. In fact, he shared that many of his teammates were bitter rivals during individual races.

However, when push came to shove, he notes that the end goal of winning is an excellent motivator for unity during races. He calls this the North Star, citing a cohesive team goal as essential to building trust among members, be that in races or in the office.

And even if that end goal isn't always a set-in-stone objective, Johnson states that: "We [may] not know exactly what that goal is going to be, but we do know we want to want to be over there, and that's the job of a good manager."

Marching in the same direction doesn't mean following the same path, though. In fact, Johnson stresses that individuality should not be overlooked for the sake of the common goal.

"You've got to be the best you in order to be a really good member of the team," he notes.

Evolution at the Peak

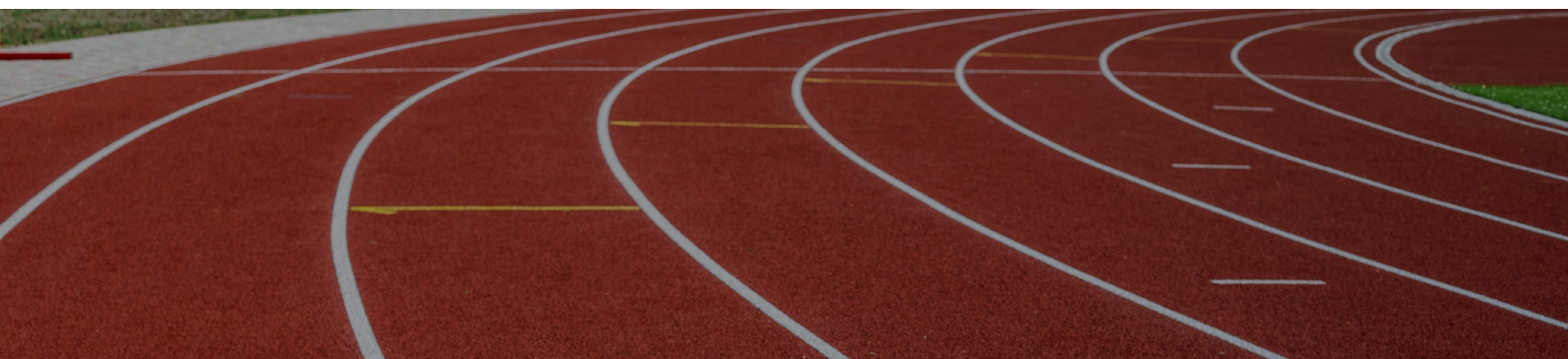
For consistently excellent athletes like Johnson, a difficult question he's often asked is how to sustain success once it is realized. For many, the goal of becoming the best is a long-standing battle that may not happen quickly. But for those who have achieved great success, keeping it is an entirely different battle.



“

“When you're trying to get to the top, you're implementing a strategy that can be a little more risky...”

“There's a different strategy that's required,” Johnson says of the marked difference between achieving and maintaining success. “When you're trying to get to the top, you're implementing a strategy that can be a little more risky, a little bit more daring because there isn't as much to lose.”



“Once I get there, there is a tremendous amount of scrutiny. There is a tremendous amount of expectation,” Johnson remarks. He notes that this is the time strategies must change, and riskier past decisions must be put aside in favor of steady, predictable maintenance.

For those who have achieved remarkable victories, preserving it means knowing both when and how a new strategy should be implemented—and most importantly, getting all team members on board with the change.

The Psychology of Winning

In Johnson’s experience, developing a strategy is best done in real-time, not before a major event occurs. He underscores the importance of preparation, practice, and coaching, but ultimately, he believes fast, pivotal decisions occur when they matter the most.

“The opportunity to get really good at making the right decision in real-time only happens in races,” he says. For Johnson, this is a matter of having the right mindset, not necessarily solely the best talent or most finely tuned ability.

He credits his keen decision-making aptitude to focusing only on the factors he can control, such as preparedness, research, and personal effort rather than external factors. During a race, he tunes his focus to only that moment—not what the others are doing, not what he intends to do after the race, and certainly not what will happen should he lose.

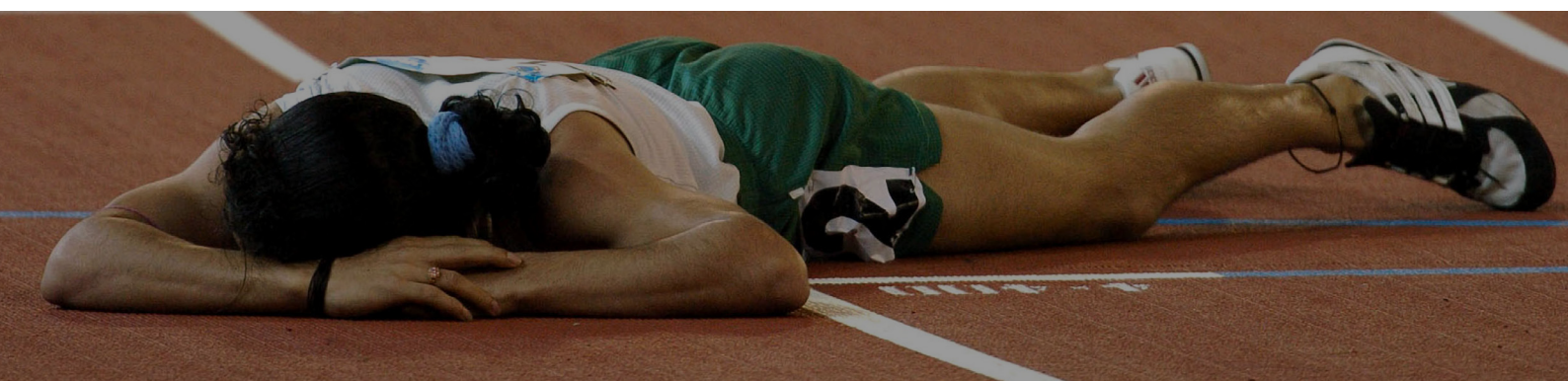
“Confidence comes from doing everything you could have,” Johnson states, and it’s that very confidence that carries him and his employees through critical business decisions.

Dealing with Disappointment

Even the best leaders—and the best athletes—are not immune from setbacks, and Johnson believes that “the best way to earn trust is to be transparent and be an example.”

He notes that offering feedback reflects as much about the manager as it does about the team. “My criticism of them has more weight when I’ve shown them my own vulnerabilities and where I need to improve—but most importantly, that I’m working my tail off to improve in those areas.”

And while many see Johnson for his victories, he is open about what he acknowledges as the greatest disappointment of his athletic career. His first Olympic event occurred in 1992 in Barcelona, where he was participating in a 200-meter relay. He was a heavy favorite to win until he was struck with a bout of food poisoning.



While he did advance to the quarter-finals and even went on to win the 400-meter race, he noted that that was not his goal at that time. “You may only get one opportunity to get into an Olympic game,” he says. “There is no ‘next year’ in the Olympics. That gives you the gravity of the situation—I was the best. I was ready a week ago. But on the day, I wasn’t ready through no fault of my own.”

Ultimately, Johnson’s advice is simple: “You can’t ignore these things. You have to deal with them.”

Whether a setback occurs through unfortunate circumstances or otherwise, he asserts that putting aside that disappointment emotionally is crucial to avoid unfair comparisons with others and harsh self-judgment.

At the time, Johnson realized: If I keep doing what I was doing before that setback, I could still win,” recognizing his achievements before the unforeseen sickness. For Johnson, experiencing setbacks does not indicate a lack of personal ability or a lack of future success.

Rallying Enthusiasm for Change

A lot has changed since Johnson’s success in the Olympics. Now a retired athlete and CEO, he discusses the digital migration many organizations are now embarking on. In particular, he examines the difficult challenge of getting a team to move along with change.

On the track, often new players, new ways of doing things, and new coaches were met with apprehension. Understandably, not everyone is interested in rapid change or the learning curve that comes along with it.

To Johnson, it is the responsibility of coaches and managers to align athletes and team members respectively to ensure everyone continues to move toward the North Star. But even the best leaders need coaching of their own, which is why Johnson offers education at Michael Johnson Performance to ensure people managers have the skills they need to coordinate the business.