Corporate America pays star athletes and coaches millions to pump up its workforce. Do these secrets of success reach beyond the locker room? Let's hear it for sportstthink!

A decade ago I sat in attendance as former Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda, baseball's ambassador-at-large, delivered an hour-long speech to employees of Staedtler Inc., a manufacturer of precision writing instruments. Before the speech, the firm's marketing vice president, Ted Wheelock, shared his hopes for the evening's festivities. The sales staff was mired in a slump. Wheelock felt Lasorda, motivator extraordinaire, could "help us take things to the next level."

I was spellbound by Lasorda's presentation, but not for the reasons you might think. Lasorda's $500-a-minute spiel touched on nothing specific to Staedtler's business. He could have been talking about pens; he could have been talking about peanut butter. His advice ranged from the merely banal ("There are people who make things happen, and there are people who wonder what happened") to the simpleminded
CHAMPIONS
(we think)
The Rules of Sportsthink

SUCCESS IS A CHOICE.
All is within our grasp, if we just follow slugger Kirk Gibson's lead by calling upon our psychic and emotional stockpiles. (Success is a Choice is the title of a best-selling book by basketball-coach-cum-seminar-speaker Rick Pitino.) "Every moment of the day provides a new opportunity to take the fearful or fearless path," says Jeff Greenwald, founder of Mental Edge International, a leader in sports-based training. "The sum of these choices will determine the quality of our performance with customers and coworkers, and ultimately, our results." This attitude über alles mantra sounds appealing enough when phrased in affirming language, but the obvious corollary is less cheery: Failure, too, is a choice. This grossly oversimplifies the mechanisms of both winning and losing.

According to Mark Fichman, an organizational consultant affiliated with Carnegie Mellon University, mental attitude is a "relatively small [factor in success] compared to your location in the social world to begin with. It is easier to become president," he adds archly, "if your father was president." Fichman also points up the logical fall in selecting only successful figures, like Lasorda and Mia Hamm, and asking them to reflect on what got them where they are: "Bill Gates tells us he dropped out of school, [but] that does not mean dropping out of school is a key to success.

SHOW NO WEAKNESS IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY.
Like the palooka who pulls himself up off the canvas after each knockdown, the dedicated employee is expected never to waver, no matter what battering he takes. But this bulletproof, bullheaded mind-set may bleed over into other areas of life. It may also not be the most productive way to function on the job. "People need to know that it's OK to falter sometimes," says Benjamin Dattner, principal in Dattner Consulting and adjunct professor of organizational development at New York University. "This approach of being constantly 'on' and never saying die is a key cause of burnout.

THE 'GAME' ALWAYS COMES FIRST.
Relationships, personal issues, extracurricular interests, even family—all take a back seat to The Almighty Job. This has been especially hard on women, already under crushing pressure to choose between domestic life and career. True winners aren't expected to avail themselves of such "easy outs" as the Family Leave Act. (Ironically, this is no longer the case in sports itself—particularly baseball and basketball—where players routinely skip games in order to tend to personal business.)

WINNING IS THE ONLY THING.
The timeless Lombardi-ism translates, in corporate settings, to "nothing matters but the end result." This schema gives little credence to effort—or to the fact that failure may have more to do with fate than effort. "If everything is do-or-die, and you fail at whatever it is you're trying to do, you've delivered a potent message to yourself," says Jim Bouton, author of the baseball book Ball Four. Critics link this axiom to the erosion of business ethics in recent decades: "Corrupt business practices have been with us since the dawn of business itself," says MacKenzie, "but the 'win at all costs' construct, imported from sports during the 1980s, greatly magnified the inclination to cheat."

"(You gotta want it)", and even included nonsense of Yogi Berra proportions ("The thing you notice about losers is, they don't win"). For his piece de résistance, Lasorda trotted out the tale of how a hobbled Kirk Gibson, through sheer grit, blasted a pinch-hit game-winning home run for the Dodgers in the 1988 World Series. "Kirk just wasn't going to be beaten that day!" thundered Lasorda, as if to imply that losing pitcher Dennis Eckersley of the Oakland A's had come to the ballpark not especially caring whether he cost his team the Series.

What, then, was so fascinating? The reaction. At the end of his talk, Lasorda was applauded and backslapped as if he'd just delivered the Sermon on the Mount. A joyous Wheelock opined that he'd gotten his money's worth—and then some. "Already?" I asked. "How do you know?" He answered by way of a broad gesture at the smiling faces and general vigor that still simmered in the room as Lasorda made his exit. "The guys are stoked," he said.

Some months later, I called Wheelock to find out how things were going. The slump continued.

Today there's no sating corporate America's appetite for the lessons and putative logic of sportsthink. "Nothing can suppress our compulsion for moving the locker room into the meeting room," says corporate communications theorist John K. MacKenzie. Between 1991 and 2002, annual U.S. corporate training budgets grew from $43.2 billion to $66 billion. Though the portion of that total given over to sports-influenced protocols is hard to pin down, the sum clearly runs to 10 figures. The domestic
banquet circuit alone is a roughly $500 million annual enterprise, and Lasorda and his ilk pocket fees that range from $5,000 into the high six figures. Companies spend additional billions on "after-action"—the books, videos, CDs, workshop tutorials, and other ancillary materials designed, says MacKenzie, to create "a bright shining world where never is heard a discouraging word and everybody is a winner all the time."

In one sense, sportsthink has come a long way since my evening with Tommy Lasorda. He represented the movement's first wave, which was all about celebrity and charisma—a McLuhanesque affair wherein the man was the message, even when the man had no message. (The biggest draw was once O.J. Simpson, who preached to standing-room-only crowds despite his diction so poor that he could barely be understood.) During the 1990s, the sportsthink phenomenon made cottage industries of just about everyone who'd ever achieved anything on a gridiron, court, rink or ball diamond.

But something else has happened during this decade: Today corporate leaders expect employees not merely to applaud the message and take inspiration from it, but to actually live it. Though household names like Lasorda are still the most recognizable part of the business, the juggernaut is piloted by a host of noncelebrity consultants. These variously credentialed business advisers work with corporate HR offices for weeks or months to inculcate a philosophical message that they believe will change the fabric of a company.

Consider the case of Boise Cascade Office Products (BCOP), a significant part of the $7 billion Boise Cascade empire. The company has enthusiastically adopted the metaphors and structures of professional sports. BCOP uses a chart of a football field to depict its progress toward its annual quota (the "goal line") for sales. It teaches new sales recruits to use sports imagery ("Think of yourself on the 20-yard line, about to kick the game-winning field goal!") and draw sales plans from NFL playbooks, sometimes complete with X's and O's. Members of a major-account team might be assigned the respective functions of quarterback, receiver and offensive lineman, each function correlated to a customer service equivalent. Administrative support personnel are urged to view themselves as assistant coaches.

These tactics have transformed sportsthink from a feel-good exercise into a much more aggressive motivational tool—one with potentially serious side effects. Sportsthink demands results it cannot deliver and teaches people to look at their jobs, if not the world itself, through an overly simplistic, ultracompetitive lens. Life becomes an EST-ian morality play in which winners win because of good character and losers lose because of a weakness of spirit. "Most of these regimens are a mile wide and an inch deep," says Jay Kurtz, president of KappaWest, a leading management-consulting firm. Curing an ailing company requires making tough decisions and bringing about tedious changes, like completely re-vamping the corporate reporting structure or gutting an underperforming unit. "Very few of these programs ever get down to the really gutsy things people have to do within a company to bring about meaningful change."

Kurtz also cautions that Lasorda-like fervor, applied in the absence of skill, can be counterproductive. "The most dangerous people in the world are the highly enthusiastic incompetents," he says. "All today's motivational blitzkrieg achieves is getting people to run faster in the wrong direction. If they don't know what they're doing, or have the wrong idea of what they're doing, their 'will to win' could destroy them." He points to Apple Computer, which, twice in its history, came to the verge of extinction by using world-class exuberance to communicate a message that had little or nothing to do with the corporate world's needs.

In every Olympic year, "Go for the Gold!" becomes a dominant theme at conventions, as workers are urged to emulate the qualities of Olympians. Yet these world-class athletic performances seldom result from camaraderie, consensus problem-solving and the other cooperative behaviors that are the backbone of business success. "Olympic medals often go to temperamental loners who shun teamwork and labor for years under conditions of obsessive personal sacrifice that few, if any, mainstream employees would tolerate," says MacKenzie. Tiger Woods is
such a perfectionist that he makes his own bed when he stays
at a hotel in a golf tournament, Benjamin Dattner, principal in
Dattner Consulting and adjunct professor of organizational
development at New York University, points out. “But that
same focus that makes him a perfectionist might make it diffi-
cult for him to be a manager, or even to be very adaptable, in
a corporate environment.”

“Athlete is a powerful word,” says Patrick Cohn of Peak
Performance Sports, who has consulted for IBM, among others.
“Athletes walk with pride. Athletes persist in the face of doubt
and defeat.” True enough. But left unsaid is that there’s little
reason for the nonathlete to look or feel just as confident.
Athletes walk with pride because they have specific competen-
cies: the ability to run faster than most other humans, to return
a serve that’s boring in at 110 mph or to hit a 5-inch sphere over
a 30-foot wall that’s 400 feet away. “Athletes,” says Jim Bouton,
baseball iconoclast and author of the tell-all book Ball Four,
“don’t become confident simply by having some other athlete
scream at them, ‘Now go out there and be confident!’”

Sportsthink also miscasts the competitive terrain facing
most companies. “Sports like baseball and football are one
team versus another. In business,” Kurtz points out, “you’re
hardly ever going up against just one team.” Adds Dattner: “In
sports everybody plays by the same basic rules. In the business
world this is not the case.”

Sportsthink plays to the Mittyism within us. The appeal of
the message is its promise of transcendence, the idea that if
Kirk Gibson could do it—gimpy legs, sore back and all—well,
so can we. No, we can’t all hit that game-winning home run for
the Dodgers. But if, as the movement’s high priests claim, we
all have within us an untapped reserve of mettle, then maybe
we can learn to hit the winning home run for our company.
Much as we wear Allan Iverson’s jersey or swing Mark
McGwire’s bat, we think we can absorb these athletes’ successes
by embracing their trappings.

If success happens for magical reasons that have nothing to
do with skill or wit or looks—if we can persuade ourselves that
Gibson launched that homer because he flat-out willed it—
then we too can rise above our limitations. “It brings people
back to a simpler time in their life,” says Mark Dixon, director
of sales and client services for Acosta Sales & Marketing, who
for the past six years has booked sports speakers on behalf of
the Southern California deli-bakery industry. “It reminds us of
when we were younger, and more optimistic about life—a time
when everything was still possible, and we were all going to
play center field for the New York Yankees.”

So what’s the harm in believing? Most of the teachings of
sportsthink, after all, are generic insights about teamwork,
motivation, goal setting and positive thinking. But corpora-
tions are spending money on metaphors and feel-good
exhortations when they could be using those resources for
more substantial and relevant training. Even its advocates
allow that many companies see sportsthink as a relatively
painless alternative to more intensive consulting. And the
The Secrets of Failure

Are you mapping out your path to greatness by studying the successes of others? Seems like a smart approach, which may be why business books promising to reveal the secrets of successful companies sell so well. But consider this: Many would say that Amazon.com became the powerhouse it is today by taking great risks, ignoring naysayers and persisting in the face of setbacks. Does that mean this strategy equals success? Not if you look at the dozens of bankrupt and now-forgotten dot-coms that used precisely the same techniques. By focusing on triumphs and ignoring failures, we can't clearly identify which techniques are incidental to success and which ones are crucial, according to Stanford business professor Jerker Denrell. In fact, drawing conclusions only from successes can be not only misleading but dangerous.

So why is there no scholarship of failure? For one thing, data about businesses that go belly-up are hard to find, says Denrell—it tends to sink along with the failed organization. People also prefer not to advertise their failures, says Richard Farson, a psychologist and author of Management of Absurd: Paradoxes in Leadership. For example, researchers rarely bother to report ho-hum results, and drug makers often suppress findings that reflect poorly on their products.

Even when data on failures are available, we tend to listen to only what we want to hear—like the inspiring stories that motivate us to persevere despite the odds. Likewise, we filter out evidence that contradicts our beliefs, particularly the mistaken idea that the opposite of a true statement must be false. By this logic, we think a course of action must either always lead to success or always lead to failure. “People believe that something always works or always doesn’t work,” explains Denrell, pointing out that real life is more complex, with countless variables influencing business outcomes. And many of these—such as what our competition will do—are beyond our control. For example, many entrepreneurs latch on to the advice to keep investing time and money into their start-up until sales take off. This bold strategy works—sometimes. Other times, it causes the business to bleed even more red ink.

Then there's the luck factor, often discounted by those with a strong wish to see themselves as masters of their fates. “We like to think our success is our achievement, our hard work,” says Farson, “but gee, plenty of people work hard and don’t succeed.” Perhaps we’d be wiser to follow the formula for success once recommended by oil billionaire J. Paul Getty: “Rise early, work hard, strike oil.”

—Marina Krakovsky

Bethlehem Steel, which undertook an ambitious sports-oriented training program back in the late 1980s. “The awards ceremonies were the worst for me,” says Foucault. “They always gave the stuff to the people who 'went the extra mile,' as if to imply that the rest of us weren’t trying hard enough. Well, I went the extra mile. I tried damn hard. I just wasn’t as naturally gifted as some of the others. I always ended up feeling like a loser, and I wasn’t the only one.”

It bears noting that no amount of team spirit was able to help Bethlehem Steel overcome global competition and the other external factors that made the company's prices uncompetitive. The steelmaker filed for bankruptcy in 2001—and faded into history two years later.

Steve Salerno's investigative book on the self-help industry will be released in summer 2005.

Sportstthink teaches people to view the world through an overly simplistic, ultracompetitive lens.