

be world class

How you can become world class?



SWIMMING champion Chris Cook and his mentor Simon Hartley have joined forces to teach their secret formula of success to firms across the region. Andrew Mernin sits in on a session as three rising stars of North East business find out what it takes to be world class.

IN ONE corner stands an Olympian who, despite admitting to being shorter than his peers and having no natural ability for [swimming](#), has taken on the world and won.

In another corner is his mentor Simon Hartley – a sports psychologist whose former clients include Premiership football teams, Olympic cyclists and top-flight rugby clubs including Newcastle Falcons.

Sat opposite are three young North Easterners who, at first glance, could be taken as college students but are actually well on their way to creating their own multi-million-pound business empires.

The youngest of them is 17-year-old internet entrepreneur Jonathan Grubin who runs website businesses MiniG Media, Free4U and Live Newcastle and is also preparing to take his A-levels this summer.

Sat next to Jonathan is Durham University graduate Emma Ailes, who set up events company Tinderbox two years ago and has since worked on a number of high-profile exhibitions. Completing the trio is 29-year-old Greg Phillips who, in just five years, has built North East Bakery into one of the biggest bakery chains in the region, employing over 100 people and rapidly approaching its target of £5m-a-year turnover.

“What does it take to be world class?” Hartley asks the entrepreneurs, glancing across to North East Olympic swimmer Chris Cook.

South Shields-born Cook spent close to a decade being trained by Hartley in his career which saw him win two gold medals at the Commonwealth Games and represent Great Britain at the Athens and Beijing Olympic Games.

Having retired earlier this year, Cook and Hartley are now focused on transferring their formula for success from the pool into the boardroom.

The pair have launched a new venture which they hope will transform the performance of businesspeople in the region through a programme of seminars, workshops and training called “You Can Be World Class”.

At today’s session probing questions are met with honest answers as the three entrepreneurs get to grips with exactly what their ultimate ambition is and where the future of their business lies.

For Phillips, being world class “is about standards and how high you set the bar and how obsessive you are about achieving those [standards](#) of quality and consistency”.

<http://www.nebusiness.co.uk/business-news/latest-business-news/2009/04/01/how-you-can-become-world-class-51140-23276621/>

be world class

According to Grubin it's about benchmarking yourself against your rivals and making sure you're always one step ahead of them, and meticulous attention to detail.

"For example, we spent an hour recently going through what weight of paper we wanted for our new contracts," he says.

Ailes believes to be world class in the creative sector means not being afraid to do things differently from your peers.

Having helped turn Cook from a swimmer who competed outside of the elite in his early career into a genuine Olympic Gold contender, Hartley knows what world class means – he also knows what it doesn't mean.

"It's a myth that only certain people can be world class and you have to be touched on the head with a magic wand."

Pointing to Cook, he says: "Here's a guy who a few years ago if you asked him if he wanted to be an Olympian that would have been top of his hit list. But a lot of people in sport would say it's too difficult.

"If you fancy joining an elite group and being in the top 3% in the world, what's stopping you? The answer is usually only you."

At the centre of Hartley's success formula are two simple elements – a dream and the steps needed to achieve that dream. And the plan seems to work, for sportsmen at least, as millions of BBC viewers found out three years ago.

It was the Commonwealth Games in Sydney. Cook had just swam the race of his life, and, as he hauled himself from the pool he was thrust in front of the cameras and asked about his strategy for the race.

The unassuming South Shields lad said: "I've no idea, I was just trying to swim two lengths of the baths as quick as I could."

But outlining the ultimate dream isn't easy. It took Cook many years and numerous prompts from Hartley to finally realise that his lifelong aim was to win an Olympic Gold in the men's breaststroke.

So what are the dreams of our three entrepreneurs who were all featured in The Journal's recent Rising Stars Future Leaders supplement?

Ailes says: "For a lot of business- people it's related to money but I think for me it's not, which is why I struggle.

"I want to get things happening but I don't really know what the dream that I'm working towards is."

Meanwhile, the baker remains undecided: "I thought I knew what I was working for then I achieved it and changed my mind. I wanted to get the business to a certain size. I wanted to employ 100 people, but I did that and then realised that I wasn't really bothered. I don't really understand what makes me get up in the morning and look forward to getting to work."

A start, a turn and a swim in the middle, is how Hartley simplified the steps needed for Cook to achieve his dream.

And now the duo are keen to introduce the analogy of "two lengths of the pool" being the only thing between the entrepreneurs and their ultimate destination.

Grubin describes his 'two lengths' as being "to build and sell a discount scheme" while Phillips says his is: "To ensure the maximum viability and profitability of the organisation." The Tinderbox founder cites her's as "to put on brilliant events and give people a really good time".

According to Hartley, once you have clearly defined the path to success, it is important not to stray from it.

He says: "When you know that what you've got is right and you know you're heading in the right direction, you find it a lot easier to not compromise.

"When things were put in front of Chris that were an attempt to drag him off course he was able to say no, it's not going to get me down that pool quicker.

A prime example of this came when a lucrative sponsorship deal – a rare thing in the notoriously underfunded sport of swimming was waved under his nose.

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"I had an Adidas deal on the table ready to go, with a big pay cheque. There's not much money in the sport so everything was right and everyone was telling me to go for it.

"But there was a niggling doubt, it was the swimsuit. It wasn't going to take me into the medal winning phase and it wasn't going to contribute to my swimming. We are only talking about two tenths of a second but that is massive in the Olympic field."

In the end, Cook shelled out £200 for a Speedo suit and rejected the chance to raise his profile in magazines and advertising boards.

Ailes admits that she has found herself straying from her own business's aim.

"I find it really hard, when people try to take me in different directions or don't believe in what I'm doing and I can't communicate it. That can be difficult."

As Cook explains however, "just sharing what's going on inside you goes a long way".

"When you know that what you've got is right and you know you're heading in the right direction, you find it a lot easier to not compromise," Hartley adds.

Another key part of the journey to become world class is - once you have outlined the simple steps you need to get where you are going - to make sure your staff and customers know exactly what those steps are.

Hartley says: "Keep in line what your 'two lengths' are and what the organisation's are. A personal experience I had which highlights the importance of that came when I was a consultant to the Institute of Sport and they would often send us on trips where we would experience what the athletes experienced.

"They put four of us burly blokes in a boat to race against two stick-thin girls. If you look at those two crews on paper you would say the four burly blokes would win because they are far more powerful.

"The only time the boat moved was when we synchronised what we were doing. We only managed to do that maybe four times. We were drenched in sweat and put loads of effort into it but these two girls shot past us and put in a fifth of the effort that we put in because they did it in synchronisation with each other."

And Phillips has seen examples of this in the baking sector. "All of the organisations that I respect would all answer yes when asked, does the team know, do the customers know, does the staff know what the 'two lengths' are, all world class companies are absolutely spot on with that."

As the session comes to an end, the trio of rising stars are asked how they intend to change their businesses now they have learned the psychological secrets of success.

Ailes, who will embark on a fact-finding mission to Sri Lanka later this year, believes the trip will be a learning experience which could help shape the future of the business although she admits she has a lot of thinking time in front of her.

"I think I need to take my head out of the day to day [running of the business] and think further ahead."

Grubin aims to concentrate on making sure he is moving in the same direction as his employees while Phillips vows to "get away from the detail".

"I have been used to doing everything myself but then you can become spread too thinly and I still get too involved.

"I'm a million miles away from being world class but I would like to think one day I could achieve that."