

In the Arena

YOUTH, COMMUNITY and ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The folks at NASA have a rule of thumb: when they're launching a rocket, if the vessel is on target and true to its mark in the first six seconds after blast-off, then their job is largely finished. If, however, it is off target by even a fraction of a millimeter in those first six seconds, it will most likely miss its target by millions of miles. The same is true of children.

In the Arena is committed to early intervention in the lives of young Americans in order to ensure that every one of this country's youth have an opportunity to launch into their adult lives with the same precision, skill, courage and attention as attend a NASA spacecraft. After all, our cargo is just as precious and our mission equally exciting.

Drawing from personal experience and observation as well as from the established scholarship of social learning theorists, who have concluded that significant change can be effected when an observer is motivated to imitate the physical and/or moral behavior of a model, In the Arena fosters lasting and meaningful relationships between the highest-caliber mentors and the youth who look up to them.

As an example of the ways in which Arena Athletes are intervening in the lives of their program participants and encouraging them to make valuable and life-improving adjustments to their behavior, consider the following story recounted by Tim Broe, a 2004 Olympic finalist at 5000m and current volunteer head distance coach for the his alma mater high school men's and women's track teams in East Peoria, IL.

Early in the season, long before any meets were on the near-horizon and at a time when Tim was largely trying to figure out how to handle the record number of participants who had flocked to the track program after news of his involvement had spread, Tim assigned his women's team a short run followed by a set of drills, strength-building and core exercises. As is usually the case, Tim ran the 20 minutes with his student-athletes and then supervised and instructed them as they embarked on their conditioning circuits.

Tim had his team striding, skipping and jumping, doing sit-ups, push-ups and balancing exercises, and even trying a few pull-ups using an available bar. Some of the student-athletes could step right up to the bar and manage a full set of pull-ups, others got in a few before fatiguing. But one student-athlete, who had a different strength-to-weight ration than the others, and who will, Tim is sure, grow into a powerful shot putter, took one look at the bar, one look at Tim and said, "Coach, I can't do this."

"Sure you can," Tim replied. "Go ahead. Give it a try."

"Nope. I can't do that. There's no way." And at this point the young woman grew visibly shy and began to back away from the bar.

"Oh no, no, no, you don't," Tim jumped in, and he corralled her back towards the bar. About as excited at the prospect of trying a pull-up as one would be at the thought of attending a novocaine-free dentist appointment, the student-athlete fixed Tim with a look of trepidation and shook her head "no."

Tim, undaunted and with a clear sense of what was at stake (namely: not merely a successful pull-up but a much greater accomplishment), guided the student-athlete back over to the bar, and asked her just to give it a try, one try. Reluctantly, she reached up to bar and when she did, Tim crouched down and grabbed hold of her feet. As she pulled up, he lifted, and lo and behold, the young woman did her first pull-up. And her second. And her third. She completed a full set.

After practice was over and the team had disbanded, the student-athlete circled back around to Tim and asked if she could speak with him for a minute. "I just want to say thank you, Coach," the young woman explained. "No one's

ever told me I can do something like that before. I didn't think I could do it and I wouldn't have tried if you hadn't asked me. So, thanks."

In her adolescent expression, that student-athlete captured the essence of In the Arena: to empower young Americans to recalibrate their lives' trajectories based on a new understanding of their very own skills, capabilities and potential. The Arena Athlete's purpose is to lift, as Tim did, to elevate the expectations of their program participants so that long after the program has concluded, each participant will continue to thrive.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

No other country has as rich a tradition of volunteerism as the United States; it's part of the fabric of our culture. Already well in place by the time Alexis de Tocqueville arrived here in 1831 to research and write *Democracy in America*, and finding its contemporary expression in the fact that the U.S. outpaces the second most generous country by nearly 4x (in 2006 the U.S. donated 2.2% of GDP to the independent sector, versus the second-place U.K., who gave .6% of its GDP), the American eleemosynary spirit champions the individual's willingness and ability to contribute mightily to the betterment of society. In the Arena is honored to lend a hand to the bearing of that torch and ideally, to fan its flames.

Thanks to public figures like Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffet, Bono and even Bill Clinton, "philanthropy" is now a part of the vernacular and coupled words and ideas like "social entrepreneur" and "venture philanthropy" are enjoying increasingly wider usage. Yet while the moneyed hubs of New York, Atlanta, San Francisco and Boston are pioneering innovative solutions to social problems both at home and abroad, some pockets of this country remain largely untouched by this wildfire of charitable thought and action.

While the work In the Arena accomplishes is complex in its execution, its blueprint is remarkably simple: anchor the most effective role models in targeted youth populations. With a premise this nimble, we can run a program anywhere today's youth gather. For this reason, In the Arena's nationwide model is readily scalable and is poised to permeate the shadowy nooks and crannies of communities that might not otherwise be touched by the highest-caliber agents of social change. With programs up and running in loci as disparate as Alamosa, CO, East Peoria, IL, and Big Bear, Mammoth and Chula Vista, CA, In the Arena is further democratizing America's charitable efforts and striving towards equal community access to the most effective youth programming.

In time, and in brief time, we believe, In the Arena's program map [Ed.: insert internal link to "Where we do it" map] will be an out-picturing of George H.W. Bush's "thousand points of light," a tip of the hat to the non-partisan vision of this country's volunteer spirit.

ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

Although the box in which In the Arena has clearly and resolutely placed itself is one of youth development, we believe that other parties benefit mightily from our programming. The broader and reverberating implications in the communities that are served are self-evident; but it also stands to reason that the group of elite athletes who comprise In the Arena's Roster benefit greatly from their involvement in the organization.

Arena Athletes are college-educated individuals of the highest character and integrity, who are within arm's reach of the remarkable goal of representing our country at the most elite level of competition. By encouraging these athletes to broaden their perspectives to include civic engagement, In the Arena asks them to shoulder a greater responsibility, but one that allows them to balance their daily physical work with equally rewarding social work. Ultimately, Arena Athletes are individuals who have come to realize and appreciate that their broad and unique skill sets can be deployed to advance the public good.

Even further beyond the personal growth embedded in an elite athlete's participation in the organization, Arena Athletes are offered remuneration that allows them to move towards financial solvency. The USOC, with its myriad responsibilities, can afford to allocate only a small fraction of its operating budget to elite athlete support. As a result, this country's elite athlete population is mired in what two time-Olympian and 5000m American record holder Bob Kennedy has referred to as a "feast or famine" situation: "The problem we have in our sport is that...if you are one of the better athletes in the world, you're doing very, very well. If you are the kind of athlete who has a

chance but you're not quite there yet, maybe finishing 8th in the Trials or 6th in the Trials, then you are struggling. You're scraping by. There is no equality there." Kennedy is speaking specifically about Track and Field in this instance, but the observation is applicable over a wide range of Olympic sports.

It's a bittersweet fact that many of today's aspiring Olympians are under-funded: bitter because many of these hard-working individuals are incurring significant debt in an effort to pursue their athletic aims; and sweet because this creates the leverage to magnetize such athletes' attention. It is precisely this market inefficiency coupled with the passion and talent of the underserved elite athlete population upon which In the Arena capitalizes.