Chapter 1

Eyeing Gold

"Clean up your sports bags." This is what my mum and dad said every day when my brother and I came home from our Judo training. For some reason, we were in the habit of dropping our sports bags right behind the door when we entered the house.

Kees, my younger brother, and I trained in the Dutch national selection for Judo. Our sports bags contained Judo suits, wet towels, our Judo belts, and materials to prevent injuries. Those bags were heavy—probably too heavy to carry them inside to the scullery where the washing machine was. As soon as we put one foot in the house, we dropped the bags. (Maybe this bad habit runs in the family, because I recognize the same behavior with my kids, and so does Kees.)

My dad had his own company and always came home late. As soon as he opened the door, he needed to "climb" inside. In a loud, irritated voice, he let us know that our behavior was not acceptable. But for some reason, we could not change this behavior. I must admit, perhaps we did not try hard enough and we were just lazy.

If I remember correctly, this laziness was the only behavior that didn't suit our role as top athletes in martial arts. Judo is a Japanese martial art that requires a lot of discipline and respect. It also requires lots of practice to master all the skills.

Laying the Groundwork

Kees and I began taking Judo lessons when we were five years old. We attended classes at a local sports club with lots of other kids. Mum and dad spent lots of hours driving us to the club and then waiting to drive us home, just as lots of other parents do.

When I was 12, we started riding our bikes to the club. Using bikes is a common means of transport in Holland. When we came home after a two-hour

training session, we would park our bikes in the garage and drop our sports bags on the floor. We trained seven days a week, and every day my father saw our bags behind the door. "Clean up your bags!" he'd shout. For some reason, we could not change this behavior.

In our teenage years, Kees and I were part of Holland's national team. We traveled a lot and won medals at international tournaments. Judo became our life. All of our teachers at school knew that we could not always be present in class or had to leave early for training.

Our friends knew we would not join them when there was a party or a birthday with cake. Judo athletes compete in different weight classes, so at every tournament, the athletes must weigh in to check their body weight for the class they will compete in. Kees and I fought in different weight classes. My mother was happy that we never had an official fight against each other.

When we weren't training, we were thinking about food. Kees and I both had to lose a lot of weight before each competition. Our fat percentage was extremely low, and we could not eat a lot the week before the weigh-in. Our diets consisted of well-balanced meals. Sweets and candy were rare treats. The benefit of living on a strict diet was that our family and friends accepted our behavior and did not offer any drinks, candies, cake, or food that was not good for a top athlete. With so few temptations, it was quite easy to stick to a strict diet.

The same for our rest. We slept, rested, and prepared ourselves for the next training. We did this 365 days a year for many years. Our life was different from most young men's. We did not drink, and we did not go to parties, birthday celebrations, or summer camps. We lived in locker rooms, sports halls, and airports—and on the Judo mat. Without being aware of what we were doing, we slowly changed our lives and our behavior. Except for the sports bags.

In 1987, I had finished my Judo training for the day; I was in the locker room. I was tired and sitting on a wooden bench. My coach Koos Henneveld entered the room, and I looked up.

"Anthonie, do you want to become an Olympic champion?" he asked.

"Yes."

My coach stepped closer and looked into my eyes and asked a second question. "Anthonie, is it also your choice?"

"Yes," I said again, not exactly knowing what this would mean for the rest of my sports career.

For the next five years, I followed a strict diet; my schooling was extended by two years, and I had a girlfriend but hardly saw her. I lived for a year in Japan. I trained more than 20 hours a week. My strength, my flexibility, my conditioning—everything—was measured.

We went to tournaments, completed evaluations to determine our improvement, did repetitions of specific moves more than 2,000 times a day. My whole life was a consequence of my choice.

In 1991, I won several international medals and became the European champion at a tournament in Prague. Based on these results, I was selected for the Dutch Olympic Team to represent the Netherlands in the Barcelona 1992 Olympics.

My coach also coached Kees, who is two years younger than I am and a talented athlete. Five years before the Olympic games in 1992, my coach asked him the same two questions: "Do you want to become an Olympic champion?" and "Is it your choice?" Kees also answered yes to both questions.

Kees also did all the hard work, trained 20 hours a day, followed a strict diet, and lived the life of a top athlete. When it was time for him to go to Japan, the Mecca of the Judo sports, for more training, he chose to go to the United States instead through an exchange program at his school.

He lived in the United States for almost seven months. During that time, the hard daily training, the diet, and the life of a top athlete became less of a priority. When he returned to Holland in 1990, he realized that he had only answered yes to the first question, "Do you want to become an Olympic champion?" Answering the second question yes and facing all the consequences of your choice is extremely difficult.

Kees was inspired by me and started to train again when he returned. He trained extremely hard, as if he were punishing himself for the seven months of not living like a top athlete. When I looked at his training effort, I felt I need to do more, too. That year, 1990, was our best training year ever.

In 1991 Kees became Dutch champion and won many medals at international tournaments, but it was not enough to qualify him for the Dutch Olympic Team. Competing at the top level of a sport is hard, very hard. Kees realized that the results he achieved were not enough and were a consequence of his choices. "That is how it works," Kees said when we heard he was not selected for the Dutch Olympic Team.

Kees became my sparring partner for the last part of "our" Olympic journey. He trained with me every day. He ate the same food as I did. He was always there when I needed him.

HEADED TO THE OLYMPICS

It was 1992. The Olympic Judo tournament was conducted at the Palau Blaugrana Arena. After all those years of focus, the day—Thursday, July 30, 1992—was finally here. This day had been marked on our calendar for years.

Based on my results I was favored to win the gold medal. In the first part of the program, every fight was perfect; they all went just as planned. I didn't have any trouble with my opponents. Every hour we came closer to our gold medal.

At the end of the day, only a few athletes were left. They all won their fights, and these final rounds decided who became Olympic champion. I had to fight an American. After five minutes, I lost with a minimum score. I still feel pain from this memory. When I left the fighting arena, I was crying. I was a broken athlete. I lost my gold medal. I lost my dream. I lost!

A Japanese athlete whom I defeated in 1991 at the World Championships won the gold. That made my loss even more painful. With tears in our eyes, Kees and I listened to the Japanese anthem during the medal ceremony at the end of the day—silent, anonymous, somewhere at the top of the stands. We left the Palau Blaugrana Arena in silence.

We realized that our dream was finished. We couldn't live another four years under this extreme training regimen. Even if we did, we would not become better contenders for the gold medal than I was in 1992. Days after the competition, we evaluated our performance. Now I had two questions for my coach that had been running through my mind for the last few days:

"Why did I lose?"

"What did I do wrong?"

Sitting at the pier in the Olympic Village, my coach answered me:

"Anthonie, you did not do anything wrong."

"But why didn't I win the gold medal? What did I do wrong?"

He looked out over the sea before answering. "If you do not do anything, you cannot do it wrong! You should take initiatives. You should attack to win. Only waiting and defense is not the way to win gold." Then he paused. The silence created impact.

"You have to take initiative to win the gold medal," he repeated. He stood and helped me up. "It's the same in life. Mark that in your mind."

I was speechless. While I thought about what he had just said, he walked away. He held his head upright and stately. His job was done. He had also lost gold.

Although I didn't know it at the time, this is the fundamental principle of a successful reinforcement program: "Take initiative."

After our Judo careers ended, Kees and I continued our lives as entrepreneurs. Kees moved to the United States and created and built up his company. I stayed in Holland and joined the corporate training industry. Using the same high-level sports mentality we grew up with, we have both succeeded in growing our businesses. Every day someone is waiting for you to take initiative!

Kees runs a retail business. He knows that "retail is detail," exactly like top-level sports. You must pay close attention to the details. There is no shortcut to the gold medal. Kees has never lost his sports mentality.

I joined Europe's biggest training company. I have trained thousands of groups on soft skills, such as communication, leadership, sales, presentation skills, and cultural change, as well as holding many individual coaching sessions.

After 10 years in the training industry, I feel comfortable comparing corporate training to athletic training. What is the difference between the way Olympic athletes train and how employees in corporations train? Not many athletes can compare their lives as athletes with life in the corporate training world. Only long experience in both worlds allows them to understand both worlds and to compare the two.

OLYMPIC TRAINING VERSUS CORPORATE TRAINING

After spending more than 10 years training as a top-level athlete and working for 10 years as a corporate trainer and consultant, I started to compare the results of various sports training methods to corporate training.

In top-level sports, everybody knows the 10,000-hour rule. The key to achieving world-class expertise in your field is to practice in a correct way for a total of 10,000 hours. A quick calculation shows that 10,000 hours is three hours of training per day for 52 weeks per year for 10 years. I did not see that happening in the corporate world. In the 1990s, training consisted of a two-day classroom event and maybe a follow-up after a couple of months.

I also noticed that the results of training in the corporate world were rarely measured. At the end of training sessions, learners might give feedback on how the training was and how the trainer performed. But that's not what matters.

Training outcomes should focus on the effect of the training, how it influenced behavior change, its impact in the organization. In sports, everything

is measured—your speed, your condition, your fat percentage, your strength, how you performed in the training, the competition. Everything is analyzed to determine the next training period. Everything is focused on the performance and getting results.

In the corporate training industry, everything seemed to be focused on the training itself: How well did the trainer do? Did HR select the correct training? Does it help you in your daily work life? Evaluation and reflection are valuable approaches in top-level sports. Every tournament, every performance gets a solid evaluation. Every athlete is realistic about receiving an honest evaluation.

When I became the Dutch Judo champion, my coach came to me and said, "Anthonie, tomorrow morning, 8 a.m." I replied that 8 a.m. was a bit early for a party. He told me, "Remember, our goal is not to become Dutch champion. Our goal is Olympic champion." So we evaluated the championship match and determined what details to work on next. We did this every day. Our evaluation always started with self-reflection. My team of coaches carefully listened to how I thought the tournament went and how I thought I could improve. We talked not only about the tournament but also about the food, the training, the preparations, the coaching, everything.

In corporate training, I see a lot of underutilized assessment tools. I am convinced that behavior change starts when you can perform a good self-reflection. If you cannot identify your own necessary improvements, you are probably not aware of them. Behavior change starts with Awareness.

Just after the millennium, I started to investigate how I could combine lessons learned from the top-level sport world and the corporate training world. What did I know from both worlds, and how could I implement some synergy?

I figured out that, strangely enough, a conflict of interest exists between the client and the trainer in the corporate world. The trainers' business model at that time was not based on results. They earned money by holding classroom training or training events. The more events, the more money. The client, in contrast, wanted to employ the training outcomes as long as possible. So the trainer earns money with more training events, but the clients want to profit from the training as long as possible. Imagine what would happen if this occurred in sports! In top-level sports, the athlete and the trainer or coach have the same goal—results at the highest level.

By asking: What is more important than the training itself? I could solve the conflict of interest. The answer is: The period after a training event. The most important part of training should be how people apply what they have learned in the training.

When I competed in Judo, the work with my coach wasn't important. It was all about the way I applied and used the Judo techniques he taught me. The important part wasn't how I trained or whether I remembered the moves or how often we trained. It was how I applied what I learned, how I changed my behavior, my Judo moves, when I had to perform.

The bridge between the training event and applying what you have learned is called *reinforcement*!