

# Olympic Gold— Achievement or Competitive?



## John Konrads

Australian Olympic gold medalist swimmer, John Konrads, believes the difference between a gold and bronze medal is all in the way you think.

## ROME OLYMPICS 1960

At the 1960 Rome Olympics, John Konrads won two individual medals: a bronze and a gold. He claims the bronze resulted from an over-focus on Competitive thinking and the gold from an Achievement motivation. (See a full description of these thinking styles, Figure 1, on next page.)

Almost three decades later, he has come to understand how these two thinking styles played out to produce two very different results.

In the 400-meter freestyle where John came in third, he focused too much on the daunting figure of triple gold medalist and arch rival, Murray Rose.

John remembers “losing concentration or focus on myself by worrying too much about what Murray was going to do. As soon as I started thinking those thoughts, I had blown my chances. Obviously, I got on the blocks and tried to persuade myself that I could win, but the negative thoughts overtook that—the focus was on the competition, the occasion and rivalry between us.”

This focus produced small but fatal flaws, for example, lifting his head at each turn looking for his competitor.

Immediately after coming in third in the 400, Don Talbot, Konrads’ coach, immediately wiped the experience by focusing John on the 1500-meter freestyle and an achievable goal. He did this by creative visualization of the event in considerable detail.

John vividly remembers his feelings before the 1500—“butterflies in the stomach mixed with serenity. Having a ‘knowing’ about being successful. It’s a sure thing!”

## THE “COMPETITIVE DISEASE”

When John took the *Life Styles Inventory™* (LSI) a couple of years ago, he identified what he now calls his “Competitive disease.” He says it’s a lifetime challenge to overcome—“It’s a challenge that is winnable through awareness and self knowledge.”

At 58 years old, John says he still battles with his competitiveness every day. Even in a family situation, he shoots back rather than focusing on **Achievement**.

## OVERCOMING COMPETITIVENESS

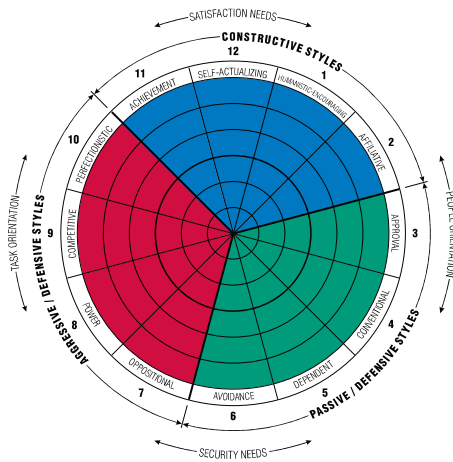
John believes the first step in overcoming competitiveness is awareness. Once you are aware you can quickly move through acceptance to action.

“The best action is to back off and refocus into yourself and don’t worry about it. The easiest way to avoid competitive leanings is to shift focus from the importance of the occasion to completing the immediate task.

“If the occasion is really very important, then you need to be careful to avoid a fatalistic attitude—you’ve got to find the right balance.”

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Figure 1: Life Styles Inventory™



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The LSI is a questionnaire that measures thinking style. Twelve thinking styles are reported. The **Achievement** and **Competitive** styles or motivations are often confused in sports and business. These two styles can be defined as:

**Achievement:** The need for Achievement—focus on accomplishment, ambition, enjoyment of challenges, and the ability to set realistic, attainable goals.

**Competitive:** The need to establish a feeling of self-worth through competing against and comparing yourself to others. Characteristics include a preoccupation with winning, a desire to be seen as the best, and extreme fear of failure and a strong need to impress others.

Other tips for moving from **Competitive** to **Achievement** John suggests:

- Focus on internal standards—Personal Best (PB). Remember the old Boy Scouts chant: DYB DYB DYB, or “Do Your Best.”
- Setting realistic, achievable goals, not unrealistic goals. For example, don’t focus on the Olympic gold medal when you should be focused on winning the local Club Championships.

When playing his other sporting passion, he constantly reminds himself to focus on the “ball,” not the “man.” “I stare at the ball to avoid focusing on my competitor.”

## COMPETITIVENESS IN BUSINESS

After retiring from swimming in 1964, John moved into business management and has held a number of senior executive positions, including CEO of L’Oreal Australia for 14 years, General Marketing Manager of Ansett Airlines, and Chief of Melbourne Major Events Company. He was also instrumental in getting the Grand Prix to Victoria.

Today, John applies **Achievement** thinking in all his business dealings. While this was initially a little harder, he now runs his own business and coaches fellow executives on **Achievement** principles.

He remembers applying **Achievement** thinking to his time at L’Oreal. “It was hard not focusing on your main competitor, especially if you are number two in the market. The big challenge was to convince yourself, and your fellow executives, on how not to copy what the competitor is doing and how to become a price leader rather than a price follower. You often have to overcome the naysayers in your own organization who did not believe we could have our prices 10% higher because our competitors will kill us.” John was always guided by L’Oreal’s founder’s **Achievement** motivation—“Ten cents more quality and \$1 more price—from spending three times what other companies were spending on R&D.”

*John Konrads is currently an executive coach with Harris Smith and Associates based in Sydney.*

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# About the Circumplex

Human Synergistics International's Circumplex provides a way to "see" what drives the performance of individual contributors, leaders, work teams and, in short, the entire organization. It illustrates the factors underlying performance in terms of 12 styles of thinking and behaving. Some styles lead to effectiveness and productivity; some do not. Regardless of their impact, they all describe what's happening inside the organization and provide a direction for change and development.

Effective individuals in groups and organizations show **STRONGER** tendencies along the **Constructive** styles.

12

Members are expected to gain enjoyment from their work and produce high-quality products/services

1

Members are expected to be supportive, constructive, and open to influence in their dealings with each other

11

Members are expected to set challenging but realistic goals and solve problems effectively

2

Members are expected to be friendly, open, and sensitive to the satisfaction of the work group

10

Members are expected to avoid making mistakes, work long hours, and keep "on top" of everything

3

Members are expected to agree with, gain the approval of, and be liked by others

9

Members are expected to operate in a "win-lose" framework and work against their peers to be noticed

4

Members are expected to conform, follow the rules, and make a good impression

8

Members are expected to take charge and "control" others, and make decisions automatically

5

Members are expected to do what they are told and clear all decisions with superiors

7

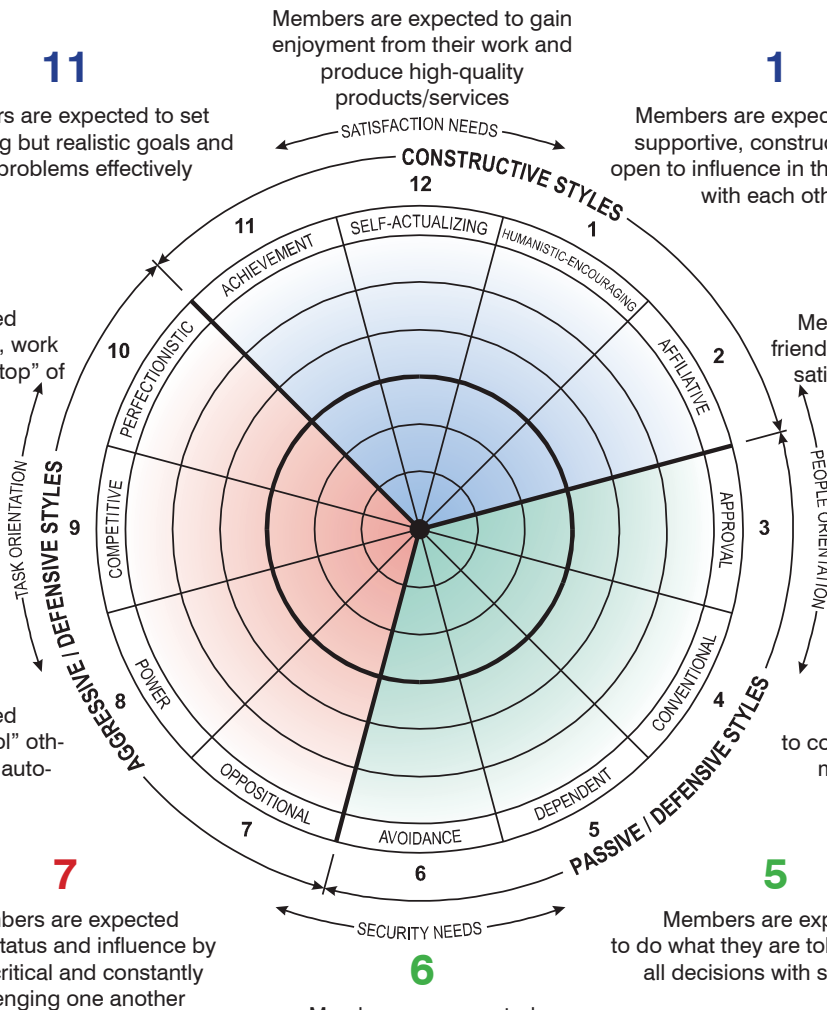
Members are expected to gain status and influence by being critical and constantly challenging one another

6

Members are expected to shift responsibilities to others and avoid being blamed for mistakes

Effective individuals in groups and organizations show **WEAKER** tendencies along the **Aggressive/Defensive** styles.

Effective individuals in groups and organizations show **WEAKER** tendencies along the **Passive/Defensive** styles.



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