CLIMBERS’ CORNER

Industrial Athletes

By Dwayne Neustaeter

I first heard of the concept of an industrial athlete last year and, as I consider the professional arborists I train and work with on a day-to-day basis, I have become convinced that there is wisdom in better understanding how this concept can be applied to our industry. I realized that my background and my style of speaking and passing on information corresponded closely with the concept of athleticism and team spirit, which is likely a significant part of the success of our training and education programs.

My background involves many years of organized sports from high school through college. I was fortunate enough to receive government funding to train, and I received coaching by Olympic team coaches. Many of the things I learned from these outstanding trainers and coaches I have carried into my training and education career. Now, 20 years later, I have made a powerful connection between the athletic mindset and the working arborist.

I think it is safe to say that arboriculture is an industry—therefore, the work performed by arborists is industrial. It is also probably safe to say that the “backbone” of this industry is generally young, strong, fit individuals who are in many ways like professional athletes. The work performed by these arborists is physically demanding from a cardio, strength, and stamina perspective. I have heard it said many times that the type of person attracted to this work is unique. Those of us who have been in the business of arboriculture for at least a few years know that not everyone has what it takes to meet the physical demands of arboricultural work, especially climbing.

The types of workers who make up the bulk of a tree crew are industrial athletes and, as such, the way they think, react, learn, and understand is unique. It may be useful for managers, leaders, and trainers to focus on teaching techniques and methods that appeal to and address the needs of the industrial arborist. Understanding the concept of an industrial athlete can have an effect on how you manage, train, and lead your team.

Any of you who have played organized sports such as football or hockey know what it is like when a team gels and when there is powerful leadership from a strong coach or manager. Like a professional sports team, there are many components to success in arboriculture whereby the manager, coach, assistant coach, captains, and individual team members fulfill the demands of their respective positions. All team members have a job to do and all are necessary for overall success. Similarly, with a tree service company, from the person who sold the removal to the worker who raked the last stick and grabbed the last hanger, everyone is vital to the completion of the job.

At the same time, I have experienced being part of a work crew where, upon job completion, the satisfaction of the customer, team, and/or individual was nonexistent.

I have found that managing your team or crew with an industrial athletic perspective is what makes the difference between having happy and productive workers and those who are “looking for a trade” to another team. Workers who operate in a strong and happy team environment will result in happier customers.

Taking the industrial athlete concept even further than teamwork and communication, consider the type of uniforms or work wear you provide. Many companies see the value in a uniform, yet uniforms are often made of material that restricts movement, itch, and/or tears easily and does not provide comfort in wet, rainy, or hot and humid environments. As a result, you see employees in tattered clothing, which can actually affect their morale and performance. Some tree companies and some clothing companies are coming to understand this aspect of the industrial athlete mindset and are providing higher-quality clothing. Yes, there is a cost associated with performance work wear, but the benefits are amazing and realized from many perspectives. Imagine playing a game of football in a typical worker’s uniform. Work wear, like sportswear, should be comfortable, durable, and make you look and feel professional.

I believe that the performance of the team is the direct responsibility of the owner, manager, or coach. If a team or organization is struggling, it is advisable to start fixing the problem by looking at the leaders. Over the years, I have seen situations where the breakdown of an organization had little to do with the quality of climbing, cutting, or rigging. Quite often, there were problems with morale, communication, or company culture and accountability.

I submit this concept of the industrial athlete and hope it spurs discussion within our industry. Possibly more companies and organizations will consider some changes within their crews that will raise morale and company culture, as considerations are made for the high level of athleticism it requires to get the job done!

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Photos courtesy of the author.