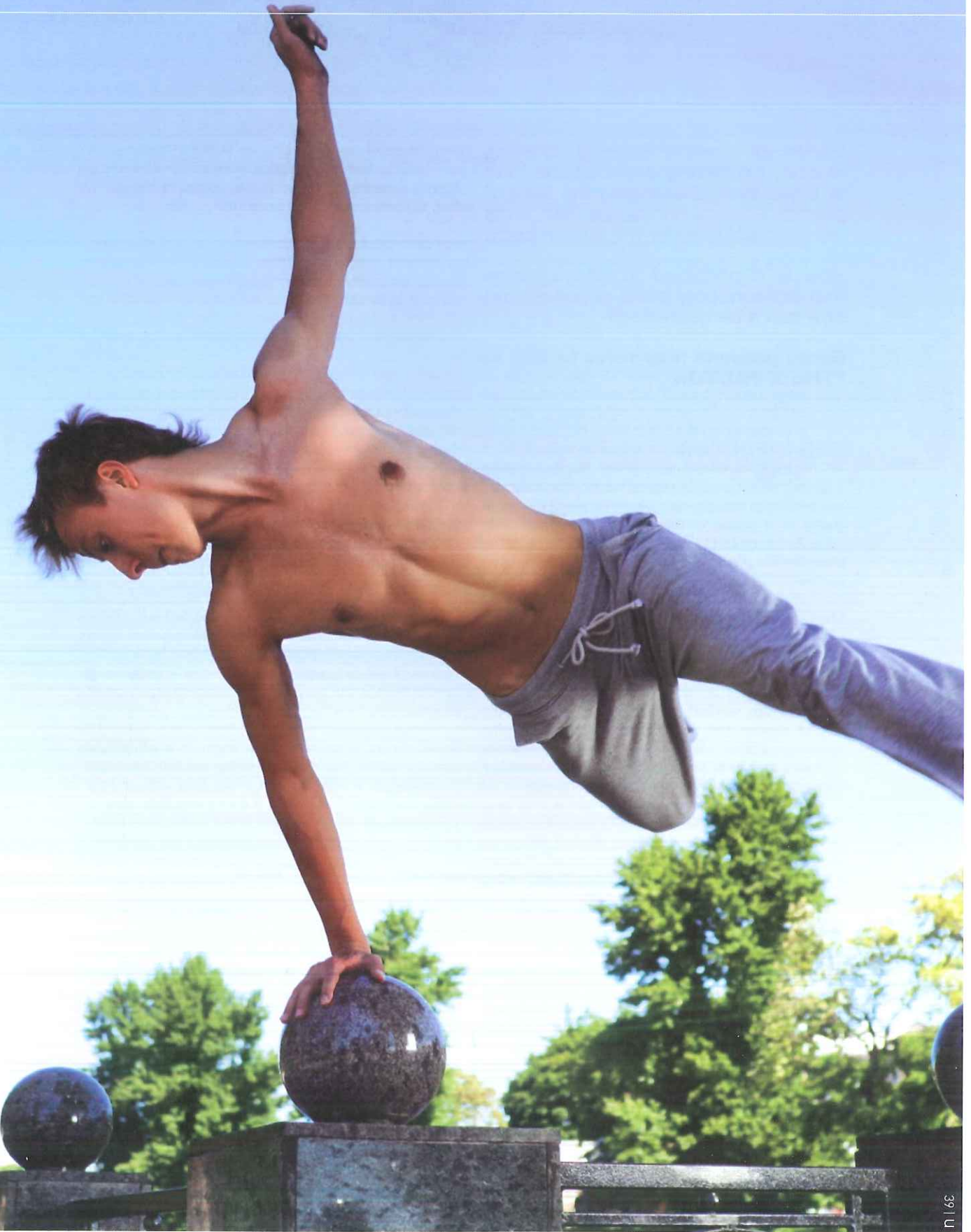


A BUDDHIST MONK PERFORMS  
ONE-FINGER HANDSTANDS...  
A POWER-LIFTER SQUATS TWICE  
HIS BODY WEIGHT...  
A SPURTER, WHOSE  
PERFORMANCE HAS BEEN  
MEDIocre ALL SEASON, PULLS  
AHEAD OF EVERYONE ELSE TO  
WIN THE 200M SPRINT...

# THE FACTOR

WRITTEN BY ROBERT TAYLOR

THE  
UNEXPLAINED  
INDICATOR  
FOR PHYSICAL  
AND ATHLETIC  
GREATNESS.



**We've all seen it happen. Defying reason, exceeding expectations, and at times even challenging the laws of physics - tremendous athletic feats are accomplished by the human body.**

**How is it possible? What generates that extraordinary burst of power, and how can it be quantified?**

**Some persons may refer to this as "THE X-FACTOR"**

### THE X-FACTOR

In the early twentieth century, the expression "the X-factor" was coined. In general terms, "the X-factor" can be used to describe an unknown and unexplainable quality of a person or thing that adds immeasurable value. As it is applied to athletic feats, "the X-factor" is the unexplainable element that may be responsible for one's success.

Many great athletes spoke about the X-factor; Arnold Schwarzenegger spoke about the power of the mind as it relates to shaping and sculpting the body, and this is what set him apart from other bodybuilders.

Dwight Phillips, world-class long jumper, believed in the role of destiny and divine intervention in achieving sports greatness. Sports journalist David Epstein discussed the role of biological or genetic factors as key elements in the evolution of athletic performance.

Could the X-factor be genetic? To what extent are genetics ingrained in our degree of physical ability? Or should it be attributed to psychological factors? We may even consider the role of destiny – is greatness predestined?

### THE X-FACTOR: GENETIC X

The genetic X-factor is more tangible than the other factors. This can be seen in sports such as horseracing, where studs are chosen to breed due to their favourable genetics. With humans, this type of breeding to achieve superior performance is not practiced in such a strategic manner; if it were, there would be numerous little Usain Bolts running around Jamaica... literally!

Nevertheless, genetics influence strength, muscle size and muscle fibre composition (fast- or slow-twitching fibres), anaerobic threshold, lung capacity, flexibility, and, to some extent, endurance.

For instance, athletic performance in a particular sport is often dominated by those with a similar genetic background. As Epstein pointed out, long-distance running is by far dominated by those of East African descent, and it is mainly Kenyans from the Rift Valley, the Kalenjins, that hold the world records in this sport.

Epstein also noted that middle-distance running is better distributed in terms of records held, although these races are most prominently won by those of North African descent. Sprinting, on the other hand, is dominated almost exclusively by West Africans, whose ancestors can be traced to Senegal, Cameroon or countries within that region.

Furthermore, Caucasians – particularly Scandinavians – dominate sports such as weight-lifting, power-lifting, throwing sports and many other strength and power-oriented sports.

While these examples are not the hard-and-fast rule, it cannot be denied that the history of superior sport performance may coincide with the genetic X-factor. Of course, there are exceptions whereby elite athletes prevail despite the genetic odds being stacked against them.

So, in theory, if we wanted to engineer a genetically superior athlete that was both strong and fast, we would "cross-breed" a Scandinavian power-lifter with an East African sprinter. Though this is a very simplistic view; if this thinking were applied practically, it would be highly unlikely to get a "dud"!

### THE X-FACTOR: PSYCHOLOGICAL X

Another factor often attributed to superior athletic performance is psychology. Psychological factors can influence analytic and tactical ability, motivation and self-confidence, coping with pressure, and psychoneural factors. Analytic and tactical abilities influence a person's reaction to a situation. These abilities, while more pronounced in some than others, can be learnt.

For instance, a child of an ancient warrior tribe will grow up in an environment where he is forced to think in order to survive; this mentality may be reflected in sporting endeavours through tactical application.

Being motivated (either internally or externally) and having self-confidence can also result in sporting glory and extreme levels of physical fitness, as a well-adjusted person is likely to be better able to focus in order to achieve a higher degree of self-efficacy than another person who may be lacking in this aspect.

The ability to cope well under pressure is another factor than can affect sports and physical fitness. One must be able to stay focused and perform to meet and exceed expectations while under increasing pressure. Adaptability is key to performance.

We can also consider psychoneural factors, which are related to the interrelationship of the nervous system and consciousness — how the individual connects with his or her body.

In bodybuilding, for example, it's crucial to master the ability to mentally connect to specific body parts or groups of muscles at any given time, for the purpose of achieving the maximum contraction while exercising or posing in a competition. If a bodybuilder is not able to isolate a muscle and contract it, the end result of his training – his body definition will not be on par with other competitors who have mastered such abilities.

### THE X-FACTOR: DESTINY X, DIVINE INTERVENTION

Finally, there's the factor to which many athletes attribute their success: destiny.

...Or even divine intervention, as long jumper Dwight Phillips claimed after winning his fourth World Championship in 2011. Having already triumphed three times before, he saw it as a sure sign of victory when he was randomly allotted bib number '1111' before the event.


Fate or destiny is a strong belief among sports professionals. The concept of "who they are meant to be" potentially and victoriously combines with "what

they are meant to achieve", with sports as the connecting bridge that brings the two aspects together.

This catch-all category of "destiny" or "divine intervention" may be a simplistic way of considering this mysterious factor that many believe is very real. But from boxers who visit the church before a big fight or golfers who believe that they are preordained to win tournaments, we should not discount this "X-factor" of fate or destiny.

Whether it be in sports, physical fitness or life in general, we must admit there is an unexplained element that ought to be accounted for. While seeking inspiration from the "greats" when it comes to achieving our own goals, it might be useful to consider what exactly is responsible for their greatness, so we can apply it to our own situations. Sports movies, where we see exceptional comebacks and extraordinary feats, are in fact depicting the X factor where the little guy or the underdog comes back and is victorious.

It's notable that many sports movies are based on reality, and chart the biographies of sporting history's greats. Thus, we see it is possible to achieve such glory – the human body has the capacity to embrace its own individual X-factor to push itself the extra mile to get to its ultimate goal. Perhaps the root of that X-factor could be the mere belief in its power – the belief in ourselves to not settle for what has been achieved, and to push beyond the realm of normal expectation.

A combination of some or all these factors may contribute to successful performance, therefore the X-factor could be a combination of a genetic or biological strain, with a psychological element to boost its potency, and the guiding hand of destiny. The ultimate success of the individual may therefore require the entire range of factors to come together and interact in the right way to lead the way to victory. That is why human beings are so very beautiful. 

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