

Q&A

What Olympic sport does your scientific career best qualify you for?

At this month's summer Olympics, there will be no medals for fastest pipetting, highest resolution microscopy, or most time spent at a lab bench. But four HHMI scientists tell the Bulletin that their research careers have nonetheless given them skills to compete in unlikely athletic contests. — EDITED BY SARAH C.P. WILLIAMS



Diane K. O'Dowd
HHMI PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

“Keeping both my research and teaching programs in good form is a constant balancing act, so I think I’m best suited for a spot on the gymnastics team.”



Michael D. Ehlers
HHMI INVESTIGATOR
DUKE UNIVERSITY MEDICAL
CENTER

“My scientific career has best qualified me for archery—keeping an eye on the target. Or perhaps if team archery were a sport, that would be a better analogy. A large part of a scientific career is training students and postdocs to be better shots than you.”



Gabrielle T. Belz
HHMI INTERNATIONAL
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
THE WALTER AND ELIZA HALL
INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL
RESEARCH, MELBOURNE,
AUSTRALIA

“I would have to say cycling—it’s a unique combination of speed, wit, tactics, razor sharp skills, and endurance.”



Paul W. Sternberg
HHMI INVESTIGATOR
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF
TECHNOLOGY

“My first thought is dry land luge, where you lie on your back on a skateboard careening down a mountain road, but I don’t think that’s an Olympic sport yet. But seriously ... I’d say biathlon—a professional scientist has to multitask and be able to change activities in a split second. You have to switch motor tasks—from moving an incubator to precise pipetting under time pressure. And you have to switch mental activities—from obsessing over a calculation to musing about possible connections of maybe-facts.”