

The Myth of Talent

Have you ever watched a young footballer breeze past opponents like Messi or read the game like Pirlo? That player who can always find the net from the most obscene angles and that goalkeeper who can perform outstanding saves time after time. You're thinking he must be naturally gifted and people would describe him as a 'talent', that's a little unfair don't you think? What you are saying is that this player has not worked tirelessly to achieve this, he did it without even trying because he was born like that. Well actually, this is called the iceberg effect. All you see is the very tip of the iceberg, where the player demonstrates great skill and composure. Underneath the water is the enormous base and majority of the iceberg, where you will find countless hours of practice and hard work.

Let me tell you a short story of success and I must add, our philosophy of talent and practice is influenced by the work carried out by Mathew Syed in the book 'Bounce'. He believes successful sports men and women are a consequence of unusual yet beneficial circumstances, hidden advantages that are not available to everybody else. Mathew Syed, British number one table tennis player in 1995, explained the unusual circumstances he was given; firstly his parents bought a table tennis table when he was young for no particular reason and put it in the garage, Mathew and his brother (Andrew) who was a very good player also took full advantage of this. They would play for hours after school and even before school, duelling and testing each other's reflexes, without knowing it they were blissfully accumulating thousands of hours of practice. Secondly, Mr. Charters was a teacher at Mathew's school; he was also the nation's top table tennis coach and a senior figure in the English Table Tennis Association. Thirdly, Mr. Charters invited Mathew and Andrew to join the local club Omega in 1980. Omega was not luxurious, it was a one-table hut with plants growing from the floor, however it was open 24 hours a day for the exclusive use of its tiny group of members who all had a set of keys. Mathew and Andrew took full advantage, playing before and after school, at weekends and summer holidays! In 1981, Omega became something of a sensation; one street alone (Silverdale Road, where the school was situated) contained an astonishing number of the nation's top players. For a period in the late 80's, this one street and the surrounding vicinity produced more outstanding table tennis players than the rest of the nation combined! Had some genetic mutation spread throughout the neighbourhood without touching the surrounding roads or villages? Of course not, the success of Silverdale Road was the coming together of factors encouraging the development of young table tennis players. Intriguingly similar to those that have, from time to time, elevated other tiny areas on our planet into the sporting ascendancy. For example, Spartak an impoverished tennis club in Moscow, created more top-twenty women tennis players between 2005-07, than the whole of the United States. The same applies to the likes of Tiger Woods, who was given a golf stick as a toddler and who do you think Venus Williams practiced with as a child?

Here at TQ Sports, we are attempting to create the circumstances necessary for success. We can help players with the right training, create positive mind-sets and offer additional advice but it's a two way street and players must also be willing to commit time and effort to the cause. What makes the best athletes the best? I'll tell you, it's the ability to fail and get back up again. How many times has Ronaldo missed a free kick in training, how many shots has Michael Jordan missed, and how many times have the best ice skaters fallen? Thousands of times, this is why they are the best. They understand failing is essentially, progressing.

In 1991, Anders Ericsson, a psychologist at Florida State University, and two colleagues conducted the most extensive investigation ever undertaken into the causes of outstanding performance. The results from this showed the *best* violinists had accumulated an average of 10,000 hours by the age of 20; 2,000 more than the *good* violinists and 6,000 more than the *average* violinists. This has sparked the 10,000 hour rule which the Premier League have bought into, creating the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) where each academy player's activity must be clocked and monitored on a Performance Management Application (PMA). I know what you're thinking, and you're right, 10,000 hours seems a lot for a sport that requires repetitive and strenuous loading on the immature skeleton, this theory was created without any physiological considerations. So, 10,000 hours of football practice will make me the best? I doubt it. However, the right amount of purposeful practice will allow you to achieve success, giving that you have the right attitude and work ethic. Purposeful practice requires your full attention and concentration, driving is a skill which we improve upon in the early days but then it plateaus, why? Because we stop concentrating on the actual driving and think about the directions or what you need to buy from the shops, this is called coasting. After all, Ericsson has conducted other studies with Darts players and found players to reach 25,000 hours of practice and not achieve excellence, therefore it is important to note that the quality of practice is just as important as the quantity.

With all of this in mind, we aim to provide the best circumstances and purposeful practice in order for our players to achieve excellence. One session a week is obviously not enough to do this, hence why we encourage players to practice certain skills at home, we post skills and drills videos upon our social media pages for players to access and our coaches may give out home drills (homework) for players to complete.

We hope you have a better understanding of the myth of talent and the power of practice after reading this, and even if you don't believe us, isn't excellence worth a try? We certainly believe it is, we believe anyone can do it with a noble attitude and strong work ethic, this is the TQ way.