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TALENT IS OVERRATED - BY: GEOFF COLVIN

Jerry Rice was the best wide receiver the football world had ever seen. Mozart was a child prodigy whose music sounded like it came directly from the mind of God. And Chris Rock is a comedic genius, and his ability to work a crowd of thousands into side-splitting laughter is without equal.

What do all of them have in common?

Natural ability is the most obvious answer. How else could these people be so much better than everybody else? This answer also has the added benefit of making us feel better about our own average skill level. If some people are “just born with it”, we are excused from putting in the herculean effort required to be truly great.

The true answer is what each of them have in common was their fanatic devotion to something the author would call “deliberate practice.”

Deliberate practice is hard work - the 10,000-Hour rule

As it turns out, all three of those extremely talented performers put in an insane amount of work to get to where they are. For instance:

Jerry Rice was famous for off-season workouts that would make other NFL players beg for mercy.

The myth of Mozart hearing his pieces complete in his head and then simply transcribing them was just that - a myth. He wrote music like mere mortals do - constantly revising and reworking his compositions until he had them just the way he wanted them.

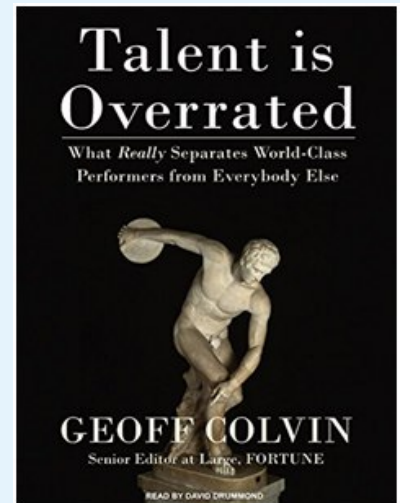
Before doing any big shows, Chris Rock would book many smaller shows in clubs without giving advance warning of his performance, testing out material until he knew he had enough to fill a full set.

Almost anybody who has achieved greatness in a field worth achieving it in has put in their time. But contrary to popular belief, simply putting in the 10,000 hours that was made famous by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers* isn't enough to become great.

5 Steps to Achieving Greatness

Deliberate practice stands out from “regular” practice in a few very important ways. It doesn't matter what you are setting out to achieve, if your practice doesn't have the following elements, your chances of ever achieving greatness is slim to none.

Now that we have the depressing part out of the way, let's take a look at each element of deliberate practice turn.



1. Deliberate practice is designed specifically to improve performance, often with a teacher's help.

The first step in deliberate practice is to identify elements of performance that need to be improved, and work on them diligently.

Golf is a great example, because most amateur golfers would give up almost anything to shave a stroke or two off their game, but for the most part are clueless on how to go about it.

When most people practice golf, they will go to the driving range, get a bucket of balls, and then proceed to hit every single ball without a real purpose.

The better way to do it would be to first understand what part of your game you need to improve. For my golf game, it's hitting the fairway off the tee. I didn't know this until I started tracking how many times I actually hit the fairway, and how many times I didn't.

So, that's a specific element of performance that needs to be improved, and I've set about getting instruction on how to improve it.

2. Deliberate practice is an activity that can be repeated a lot.

This is the part where the 10,000-hour rule comes in. You need to get your reps in.

Moe Norman was a Canadian golfer who never rose to prominence on the PGA tour because, well, he was a little bit quirky. Ok, he was a lot quirky. He was never as interested in winning tournaments as he was about striking the ball well - every single time.

From age sixteen to age thirty-two, he hit 800 balls a day, five days per week. Over his lifetime he claims to have hit over four million balls. He became so accurate over time that if he hit ten shots in a row, all ten of them would come to rest within an area no bigger than a beach towel.

Anybody who has ever picked up and swung a golf club would tell you that it's not possible. Except, of course, for somebody who had hit four million golf balls over a lifetime.

3. Allows for continuously available results.

As Steve Kerr, who was at one time the Chief Learning Officer at Goldman Sachs, once said:

Practicing without feedback is like bowling through a curtain that hangs down to knee level. You can work on technique all you like, but if you can't see the effects, two things will happen: You won't get any better, and you'll stop caring.

Again, most things that can be practiced can be done without paying attention to the results. You could easily go to the driving range, hit 100 balls, and have no idea whether or not you practiced extremely well, or extremely poorly.

By changing your approach a little bit, and by aiming at the yardage markers on the range, you can very quickly figure out how well you are doing.

Tiger Woods was famous for never hitting a shot on the practice range without having a purpose. He was always trying to accomplish something with his shot so that he could determine whether or not he executed it properly.

4. Is highly demanding mentally

This one comes as a surprise for most people, but even when attempting to become great at a physical activity or sport, the chief constraint is mental.

It's quite easily mentally to go to the golf range and hit 100 balls without a real purpose. But the very first time you try and make your practice deliberate, you'll walk away from the experience drained. The difference is in the concentration required with deliberate practice.

In fact, in most fields the most anybody can sustain deliberate practice is five hours a day. Any more and your mind will simply check out.

5. Isn't much fun.

Deliberate practice isn't inherently enjoyable. For professional golfers, practicing putts from five feet or less over and over again isn't fun. Shooting free throws for basketball players? Not fun. Practicing scales for musicians? Nope, not fun.

This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it sucks that in order to become great you need to spend so much time on an activity that isn't inherently enjoyable. On the other hand, it's great because it means that the number of people who are going to put in the same quality and quantity of practice as you are few and far between.

As Angela Duckworth described in a TED talk that now has over six million views, "grit" is a better indicator of success than other factors that people typically assign to successful people.

The billion-dollar question

So, the question isn't really whether or not you have the ability to become great at your chosen field. The question, instead, is whether or not you have the desire and stick-to-itiveness to get there?

For most people it comes down what other things they are willing to sacrifice in their life to become great. Sometimes we don't have to look too hard, either. Maybe you could cut out some of the time you spend on Facebook or television. Maybe you could cut out the mindless gossip you engage in at the office.

The point is this: greatness is a choice and a commitment.

So, are you going to make the choice to be great?

