

Talent is a myth

By  Sid Peimer

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I always thought that you were either creative or not. I also felt that I had an uncanny ability to determine whether an applicant would be a good planner or not. Either you had it or you didn't. Boy was I wrong.



You become good enough to compete at the very top not through genetics, but thanks to a range of factors. (Image: urbanora, via Wikimedia Commons)

In 1995 Matthew Syed (the Author of 'Bounce', on which this article is based) was the number one table tennis player in Britain. No small feat in a country with over two million participants (we'd probably see the same numbers if we had the same weather).

At first, he (and no doubt his parents) ascribed his success to his inherent speed, guile, mental strength, agility, and razor-sharp reflexes. Genetics if you will. However, he took an honest look in the mirror and discovered the extraordinary truth: it was none of these. There is no such thing as innate talent.

It's not natural

We will get back to the ping pong revelation after I've countered statements such as "What about the 'natural' Kenyan athletes?", "What about Mozart?" or even the Somalis who seem to have taken to piracy like a duck to water.

Granted the pygmy population have never featured in the 800m, but Kenyan's are, contrary to popular opinion, not born athletes. It is a statistically flawed generalisation. You could strengthen your argument by looking at the 'stats': between 1986 and 2000 where Kenyans won 12 out of 14 of the men's World Cross Country Championships. However, if you look at the geographic spread, 90% of the top Kenyan athletes come from the Nandi region, or more specifically the town of Eldoret (which most of the Kenyan athletes refer to as home).

Why are they so successful? Firstly, the altitude is high at Eldoret, and unless there is a substantial shift in tectonic plates, it remains high all year round. Professional athletes who live at sea level will spend a large part of their training at high altitude - it just makes you a better runner. In addition, Kenyan schoolchildren run an average of 80 minutes a day (mostly to school and back) which has given them a VO2 max (maximum oxygen uptake) 30% higher than those who did not run. By the time they finish school, they are the equivalent of well-trained athletes. So, if that's their starting point, their dominance in running is no mystery. It is not a Kenyan thing; it is an Eldoret thing.

Interestingly enough I also have a VO2 max way greater than the average, however my parents were kind enough to give me a lift to school every day.

Music to his ears

Mozart produced many works before his 10th birthday, so we would have no hesitation in proclaiming him a genius. As Malcolm Gladwell in his book 'outliers' proposes, you are an expert in your field after 10,000 hours of practice, but hours that involve continuous feedback for improvement. Mozart had hardly lived 10,000 hours when he started composing!

But that's not the whole story: Mozart's father Leopold was a famous composer and a domineering parent who trained his son relentlessly. In addition, Leopold was deeply interested in how music was taught to children. So Mozart was receiving probably the best instruction in the world from someone who lived with him. Mozart's masterpiece is Concerto No. 9 which he composed when he was 21. By this time he had been through 18 years of extremely dedicated expert training - an ideal platform from which to create something extraordinary.

Check mate

However, the Hungarian Laszlo Polgar was not convinced. He looked for a suitable mate who would produce his children for an experiment: to immerse them in a field from the day they were born, to determine if they would become prodigies. He charmed a young lady by the name of Klara, who subsequently gave birth to three girls. He chose to train them in a field where relative performance could be measured - where there was a win or lose. It was chess (in which he and his wife had limited ability). He started training the day they were born. To cut to the chase, these were the results for the three:

- Susan: The first woman player in history to reach the status of grandmaster.
- Sofia: Produced the fifth greatest performance in chess history by winning eight straight games in the Magistrale di Roma.
- Judit: Universally considered to be the greatest female chess player of all time.

Leaving Mozart to decompose in peace, and Laszlo to produce more prodigies, let's return to Matthew Sayed's stellar performance as a table tennis player.

Lay it on the table

Matthew's first clue came about when Desmond Douglas, the speedy Gonzales of English table tennis, had his reflexes tested. To the astonishment of all, his reflexes were slower than less successful players. The result was put down to a faulty machine. However, Matthew Sayed discovered the truth when Douglas told him how he trained for many years - in a room hardly big enough to fit in a table. The result was that he had to stand close to the table and the only way to get really good was to learn to read the other person's actions a lot faster - before they hit the ball actually. So it was not his reaction speed that gave him his claim to fame, but the years of training of anticipating where the next shot would go by reading cues such as body movement - something others neglected, especially people with lots of space behind them.

So Matthew took a long look in the mirror and discovered the reasons why he was so good:

1. His parents, for some inexplicable reason, bought him a table when he was young.
2. He had an older brother who loved the game as much as he did.

3. He had a teacher at school who cared about one thing above all: table tennis.
4. The sports club where they could train was open 24/7.
5. His street (where children had most of these advantages) produced more first class table tennis players than the rest of the country combined. Another example of the Eldoret phenomenon.

So, next time you think you're buying talent - you're not. You're just buying the result of incidental factors which have made up the applicant's life. There's only so much genetics can do.

I'm often asked how one becomes a planner. If you look at where planners come from: lawyers, psychiatrists, drop-outs, pharmacists and a killer whale trainer, there is one common theme amongst this uncommon bunch: they were forced to (drastically) change their perspective when they became strategic planners. And that's what planners are paid for: their perspective.

Ref: Matthew Sayed. Bounce. The myth of talent and the power of practice. Fourth Estate, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2011.

ABOUT SID PEIMER

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