

# Talent Is Overrated

## What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else

by Geoff Colvin

[Fertig Notes]

- 1) When asked to explain why a few people are so excellent at what they do, most of us have two answers, most people have two answers. The first is hard work. We tell our kids that if they just work hard, they'll be fine. It turns out that this is exactly right. They'll be fine, just like all those other people who work at something for most of their lives and get along perfectly acceptably but never become particularly good at it. So our first answer does not hold up.
- 2) Contemporary athletes are superior not because they're somehow different but because they train themselves more effectively. That's an important concept for us to remember.
- 3) We must be clear about what we mean by the term "talent." When it's used in ways that change the courses of people's lives, it's a natural ability to do something better than most people can do it. It is innate; you're born with it, and if you're not born with it, you can't acquire it. Most of us believe that talent exists in practically every field. The idea of giftedness has a very considerable head of steam behind it. But what if the concept itself turns out to be troubled? Since talent is by definition innate, there should be a gene (or genes) for it. The difficulty is that scientists haven't yet figured out what each of our twenty thousand plus genes does.
- 4) *What made Jerry Rice so cool?* Everyone in the world seems to agree that Rice was the greatest because he worked harder in practice and in the off-season than anyone else. Yet we know that hard work often doesn't lead to extraordinary performance. So there must be something else lurking in Rice's story. *He spent very little time playing football.* Over the course of a year, Rice averaged 20 hours a week working on football. That's about 1,000 hours a year or 20,000 hours over his pro career. He played 303 NFL games, about 150 hours of playing time as measured by the game clock. He devoted less than 1% of his football-related work to playing games, spending almost all of his time on other activities. *He designed his practice to work on his specific needs.* Not being the fastest receiver in the league turned out not to matter. He became famous for the precision of his patterns. His weight training gave him tremendous strength. His trail running gave him control so he could change directions suddenly without signaling his move. The uphill wind sprints gave him explosive acceleration. His endurance training gave him a giant advantage in the fourth quarter.
- 5) *It's designed specifically to improve performance.* The key word in this attribute is *designed*. At least in the early going and sometimes long after. It's almost always necessary for a teacher to design the activity best suited to improve an individual's performance. There's a reason why the world's best golfers still go to teachers, one of those reasons goes beyond the teacher's knowledge. It's his or her ability to see you in ways that you cannot see yourself. Without a clear, unbiased view of the subject's performance, choosing the best practice activity will be impossible. Very few of us can make a clear, honest assessment of our own performance. The best methods of development are constantly changing, they're always built around a certain principle: They're meant to stretch the individual beyond his or her current abilities. Deliberate practice requires that one identify certain sharply defined elements of performance that need to be improved, and then work intently on them. Drawing three concentric circles, label the inner circle the "comfort zone," the middle one the "learning zone" and the outer one "panic zone." Only by choosing activities in the learning zone can one make progress. That's the location of skills and abilities that are just out of reach. We can never make progress in the comfort zone because those are the activities we can already do easily, while panic zone activities are so hard that we don't even know how to approach them. Identifying the learning zone is the first and most important traits of deliberate practice.
- 6) Knowing what lies ahead for them, they prepare for it and thus perform better. Much of the power of looking further ahead comes from the simple act of raising one's gaze and getting a new perspective, and doing it not once or occasionally, but using practice principles to do it often and get better at it.
- 7) Know what you want to do. The key word is not *what*, but *know*. Because of the demands of achieving exceptional performance are so great over so many years, no one has a prayer of meeting them without utter commitment. The first challenge in designing a system of deliberate practice is identifying the immediate next steps. Most of us are completely unqualified to figure these things out by ourselves; we need help. We can see mentors in a new way- not just as wise people to whom we turn for guidance, but as experienced masters in our field who can advise us on the skills and abilities we need to acquire next, and can give us feedback on what we're doing. Get others' views about what you should be working on and how you're doing too.

- 8) Practice activities are worthless without useful feedback about the results. These must be self-evaluations; only we can know fully what we were attempting or judge how it turned out. Excellent performers are more specific. They judge themselves against a standard that's relevant for what they're trying to achieve. Sometimes they compare their performance with their own personal best; sometimes they compare with the performance of competitor's they're facing or expect to face; sometimes they compare with the best known performance by anyone in their field. Choose a comparison that stretches you just beyond your current limits. Too high a standard is discouraging while too low a standard produces no advancement.
- 9) *Understand the critical roles of teachers and of feedback.* Most top-performing organizations have explicit coaching and mentoring programs. Most organizations are terrible at providing honest feedback. The annual evaluation exercise is often short, artificial, and mealy mouthed. Employees have no idea how well they performed and thus no prospect of getting better. Any enterprise that wants a culture of true candor can have it, and there's no excuse for not having it.
- 10) Trust is the most fundamental element of a winning team. If people think their teammates are lying, withholding information or planning to knife them, nothing valuable will get done. Trust by its nature is **built** slowly.
- 11) A study of professional pianists found that the more practice they did before age sixteen, the more myelin they had in the critical parts of their brain. Starting early holds advantages that become less available later in life. Yet even more important than these advantages is a different factor, and that is the simple manner of time and resources. As we have seen repeatedly, becoming world-class great at anything seems to require thousands of hours of focused, deliberate practice, e.g. the top-ranked violinists in the Berlin study had accumulated about ten thousand hours of practice by age twenty, at which point they were practicing some twenty-eight hours a week and spending many additional hours studying. Only in childhood and adolescence will the time typically be available.
- 12) "Flow" describes a state in which a person is so totally involved in a task that time slows down, enjoyment is heightened, and the task seems almost effortless. This "high" is achieved when the challenge just matches the person's skills; if it's too easy the experience is boring, too hard and it's frustrating. As people master tasks, they must seek greater challenges and match them with higher level skills in order to keep experiencing flow. Since it requires constantly trying to do things one can't quite do, and thus failing repeatedly, practice is "not inherently enjoyable." But top-level performers often report the opposite. Monica Seles: I just love to practice and drill and that stuff. Practice is somehow meeting an inner need. Producing the highly enjoyable flow state could be part of it.
- 13) Each increase in competence is matched to a better environment and that environment will be expected to further their competence. This multiplier effect accounts not just for improvement of skills over time but also for the motivation that drives the improvement, as the young player's satisfaction leads to practice more. Most of them were regarded as fast learners by their first teachers. Whether or not they were is not known. However, the attribution of such was one major source of motivation. The teacher soon treated them as "special" learners, and the students came to prize this very much. As they began to receive recognition for the talent, their investment in the talent became greater. It now became their special field of interest. A beginner's skills are so modest that he can manage only a little bit of deliberate practice, since it's highly demanding. But that little bit of practice increases skills, making it possible to do more practice, which increases the skill level more. In virtually every field, beginners manage more than an hour of practice/day, but by the time they become top performers, they've built themselves up to handling 4-5 hours per day. It isn't quite right to say only that the practice caused the performance or vice versa. Each contributed to the other. What triggers the multiplier effect? It begins with some small advantage, a little difference that tips a balance and starts a cycle of increasing motivation and performance.
- 14) Everyone who has achieved exceptional performance has encountered terrible difficulties along the way. If you believe that doing the right kind of work can overcome the problems, then you have at least a chance of moving on to ever better performance. But those who see the setbacks as evidence that they lack the necessary gift will give up. They will never achieve what they might have.
- 15) Perhaps it's inevitable that not many people will choose to pay it. But the evidence shows also that by understanding how a few become great, anyone can become better.