

More Important Than Talent

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Parents ask me all the time if I think their child has what it takes to play at the college or professional level. They are asking if I think their kid has enough talent. My reply:

"How much are your kids willing to suffer?"

The answer to that simple question will go a long way in determining whether any athlete will reach his potential, and perhaps play at an elite level. Sorry to burst many bubbles, but if athletes are not willing to suffer, chances are slim that they will make it. The will to suffer and endure not only separates average athletes from elite ones, but it separates talented elite athletes from their peers as well.

(I recorded a short video on this as well, added December 1)

Now I know that genetics, deliberate training, coaching, and a whole slew of things go into the development of athletes. To place all your emphasis on any one factor is ill advised, and very narrow minded. Some people do this with the so-called "10,000 Hour Rule" of deliberate practice, while others believe that you either have talent or you do not.

I am in the business of training elite soccer players. I have been doing this for nearly 20 years. I have learned that no one factor takes an athlete to the next level. A combination of factors do, and for me, an athlete's willingness to suffer, his or her comfort with being uncomfortable, is often a strong determinant upon whether they reach their potential, or instead become another one of those "shoulda, coulda, woulda" players.

The current mythology of overnight success, where we are lead to believe every success story was born with the talent, has blinded us to the fact that the elite athletes we see on television have all suffered. They have practiced and toiled for long hours, day after day, when no one was watching. Time and again, when they wanted to quit, they did one more repetition, ran one more lap, and trained a few minutes longer. They gave up time with friends and family to pursue their craft. They make it look easy because of the thousands of hours that they made it hard on themselves. They willingly made themselves uncomfortable! They suffered because they knew that they had to in order to succeed.

Most of the athletes I work with will not ever achieve their true potential, because the thought of suffering and discomfort frightens them. Some just do not like being out of their comfort zone. Others

have a fixed mindset, and are afraid that if they give their best and come up short they are some kind of failure (which of course they are not), so they never try.

Far too many have been coddled by their parents and protected from failure. Others have had coaches who let them give less than their best because they were a 12 year old star. When a coach got tough, these players were used to backing off. When they encountered adversity, their parents stepped in and intervened, instead of using it as a teachable moment. When given the choice of whether to embrace suffering, or pull back, these athletes often chose the easy path. That is why they will not make it.

Anson Dorrance is the women's soccer coach of the twenty-two time National Champion University of North Carolina. He once encountered Mia Hamm, the reigning college player of the year, and already one of the top players in the world, training by herself early one morning on a hot, humid summer day. As he watched, she pushed herself through sprint after sprint, falling to the ground and gasping for breath after each. He wrote the following message to her:

"The true vision of a champion is someone bent over, drenched in sweat, at the point of exhaustion, when no one else is watching."

Mia Hamm went on to become the best player in the world, not only because she had talent and great coaching, but because she was willing to suffer more than her competitors.

Are you instilling a willingness to suffer in your athletes? In your kids? Are you challenging them, making them uncomfortable, pushing them hard, and then pushing a little harder?

Are your kids willing to suffer?

If they are not, they can still do a lot of things in life, but becoming an elite athlete is probably not one of them.

Help them build the will to suffer, to endure in the face of great obstacles, and the ability to cherish the opportunity to struggle, and chances are far greater that they will reach their potential in whatever field they choose!

Suffering is the elite athlete's best friend!