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**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

WSJ.com

GOLF JOURNAL | MARCH 19, 2009, 11:03 A.M. ET

## Mastery, Just 10,000 Hours Away

*Forget All the Talk of Natural Prodigies -- Being the Best Really Takes Hard, Hard, Hard Work*

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT



Golf's Grand Illusion is that, secretly, we're a lot better than our scores would indicate. All we need is a little more practice and a few more rounds under our belt to get there. But who has the time?

The illusion stems from the ease with which all of us, on rare occasions, drain long putts from the fringe, pitch to tap-in distance from 85 yards and hit drives on the sweet spot. Surely learning to pull off such shots regularly could only be a matter of making a little more effort.

Two recent business books concur, provided we drop that phrase "a little" from the supposition. The common thesis of "Outliers," by Malcolm Gladwell, and "Talent Is Overrated," by Geoff Colvin, is that super-high achievers are not fundamentally different from you and me, they just work harder and smarter.

Both books, for instance, debunk the myth that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a born supernatural. The musical works he composed as a child were not particularly good (and were suspiciously written in the hand of his father, Leopold, a well-known composer). Most of them, even into his late teens, were rearrangements of other composers' pieces. As for his precocious skills on stage, modern musicologists estimate that his abilities were actually only about half as advanced as those of a run-of-the-mill prodigy today.

So why the reputation as a boy genius? Because he did start early, at 3, under the expert tutelage of a father who was not only a gifted musician but also a specialist in the education of young talent. Leopold Mozart pushed his son to practice and perform nonstop, even though it was mostly drudgery, and gave him constant reliable feedback, as did audiences. By 21 Wolfgang was composing works that will live forever, but by that age he had been working diligently at the task for 18 years.

Substitute Earl Woods for Leopold Mozart, as both authors do, and the result is nearly identical. At 5, Tiger Woods was a marvel, it's true, but the only people he was actually beating at that age were other kids (and once -- at 2, on "The Mike Douglas Show," with a little cheating -- Bob Hope).

In explaining the development of extraordinary talent, both Mr. Gladwell and Mr. Colvin zero in on seminal research by Florida State Professor Anders Ericsson and colleagues that suggests the threshold for world-class expertise in any discipline -- music, sports, chess, science, business management -- is about 10 years, or 10,000 hours, of persistent, focused training and experience. Mr. Gladwell leaves the work component of success mostly at that, and moves on to examine how other factors, such as obscure circumstances from their early lives, contribute to the achievements of hard workers.

Mr. Colvin, on the other hand, bores into the details of all that hard work to identify the most productive components. This is where things get interesting for golfers.

The most successful performers in any area, he writes, engage in "deliberate practice." This is activity specifically designed, ideally by an expert teacher, to improve performance beyond a person's current comfort and ability level. These activities are repeatable, provide clear feedback and are highly demanding mentally, even when largely physical. The training Mozart received as a youth is a perfect example.

The good news about deliberate practice is that, with commitment, almost anyone can engage in it at any age. And in most endeavors -- certainly in golf -- deep reservoirs of expertise and pedagogical techniques have developed over the years to help practitioners make the best use of their time and energy.

The bad news is that deliberate practice is very hard, and usually unpleasant. "It has to be. Otherwise everyone would be an expert," said Mr. Colvin, a Fortune magazine columnist, in a telephone interview this week. (Disclosure: Mr. Colvin and I were colleagues at Fortune, although before this week we hadn't talked in 20 years.)

For golfers, this can be a buzz killer. Take what for most of us comprises the bulk of our practice: hitting balls at the range. Mr. Colvin, a lifelong golfer, narrates a typical range session as a way of conveying exactly what deliberate practice is not. We drag over one ball after another and hit, with no plan and no particular goal. We may vaguely aim at targets but we don't closely monitor the results or otherwise seek meaningful feedback. Our minds wander. Most fatally, we often find the experience pleasurable and relaxing.

"There's nothing wrong with that," said Mr. Colvin. "But we shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that when we hit balls this way we're accomplishing anything at all."

So how should we "deliberately" practice golf? To find out I contacted Pia Nilsson, Annika Sörenstam's longtime instructor. She is the author, with Lynn Marriott, of a book about practice, "The Game Before the Game," that is also based in part on Prof. Ericsson's research.

"You don't have to spend 10,000 hours at it. If you have only two hours a week available, you can make those two hours count for a lot if you commit to quality practice," she said.

The first step should be evaluating your game (preferably with the input of an instructor) and identifying one or two high-value areas to focus on first, and exclusively. "Ninety-five percent of people make the mistake of going right to some kind of technical swing fix, but usually there are more effective things to work on," she said.

Common targets that can produce big, immediate payoffs are tempo, the short game and developing an ironclad, stress-reducing preshot routine. Golfers with reduced flexibility and strength want to focus on thoroughly understanding those limitations and developing workarounds, perhaps while also launching a long-term effort to become stronger and more supple.

But don't expect this kind of practice to be as satisfying as whacking balls on the range. One drill that Ms. Nilsson and Ms. Marriott sometimes recommend is a super slow-motion, 30-second swing -- the tai chi swing, they call it. "About 25% of our students find this to be so difficult and awful that they won't do it," Ms. Nilsson said. I'm one of them. Each second is agony. Why? For people whose minds customarily operate at 100 mph, slowing to a snail's pace is just plain hard, but being totally in the present moment is a key to great performance, Ms. Nilsson said. The slow swing also reveals blind spots in awareness of where our hands, limbs and the golf club are. This is surprisingly uncomfortable, but the best players are hyper-aware of their positions throughout a swing and thus can detect when things are off.

One effective deliberate practice drill for the short game helps develop feel for distance on lag putts. Immediately after stroking the ball toward a hole, close your eyes and tell yourself explicitly where you think the putt will end up -- 6 inches to the right and 2 feet long, for instance. Most likely you'll

be way off. This drill, too, becomes unaccountably disagreeable after more than, like, three minutes. But it works.

One possible takeaway from all this is to say, "If deliberate practice is what it takes to get better, no thank you. I'm happy with my game the way it is." No problem. That's one of the great things about golf. With its handicap system, you don't have to get better to have fun. Moreover, simply understanding how much hard work is required to make significant progress as a player reduces the power of the Grand Illusion, and that would please even Mr. Colvin. "One of the main problems golfers have is unrealistic expectations," he told me. "They make themselves miserable when they should be having fun."

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page W6

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