

Deliberate Practice is Success

A bowls' coach attended my regular training session as an observer and at the conclusion asked me what makes for a good bowler. Gee I gulp when asked that as you hope to know the answer. I replied they needed the raw talent of ball skill and sport skill, as their base, then the important ingredient of motivation to optimize that skill.

As most of we bowlers are over 50 years of age, I reckon collectively we are not (necessarily) prepared to work too hard to be as good as we could be. Is that a question of a balanced life where bowls fits in, or a sheer avoidance of grit and determination.

Conversely I see a lot of 'young guns' strutting around beating all us oldies and I think inwardly... get a life boys, you should be beating us just because you are younger, fitter, faster and with all your faculties. I don't immediately think of them as fair dinkum sportsmen at their present levels of performance. Doesn't mean they can't get there.

Anyway. I direct this column to anyone (youngies or we grey power groupies) keen to develop your bowls much further.

An article titled 'Success is all in the mind' featured prominently in the weekend newspaper and I was struck by its relevance to sport and our bowls. And I thought of those I have been fortunate to coach in Lina, Jude and Safuan for whom all achieved international success. Why?

The article cited the research of a Dr. Ericsson on ...deliberate practice...which makes someone extremely good at what they do. Thus Lina, Jude, Safuan in bowls.

Ericsson saw deliberate practice...as the major bullet taking the player into the stratosphere of brilliance. Again, these three bowlers and their successes. He maintained it, success, is not innate talent, but practice; practice though of a particular, concentrated and grueling kind.

Ericsson reckons that the champion has a complex cognitive process that pushes the body, and mind, to extraordinary heights. And he cited Tiger Woods and Roger Federer. In training I can still and well recall some sessions where Lina, Jude and Saf displayed these heights to me, extraordinary dedication to purpose.

Ericsson maintained everyone has that capacity to be an expert (bowler) as there is no known limit to the brain. Hey, that means you, so go tell the selectors to watch out there is hope yet. My observation in coaching where I am primarily watching behavior is the limit to success is our ego, our emotion. All linked to our effort. Or lack thereof.

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Boy, Ericsson's content is good fodder for me to push in my coaching. Listen to this. He said '...deliberate practice begins in the brain. What makes someone spectacular in their field – ours being bowls – and keeps them there is training via a kind of focused, repetitive practice in which the person is always monitoring their performance (in games and training), correcting, experimenting, listening to immediate and constant feedback, and always pushing beyond what has already been achieved. He put the kybosh on the idea that critical feedback is damaging.'

Note here – immediate feedback is best done and provided by your coach, or in the absence of having one, your teammates. And feedback has to be both at training and post events.

Ericsson felt if you are in an accepting world (by that he meant no one criticizes) people don't develop or get better. For him, and I accede to it too, expert performers / bowlers (and include bowls coaches) there's always effort, improvement is never effortless.

Finally, Ericsson discovered one other thing in his research to apply to our sport, bowls and 'deliberate practice'.

Using the best performers in the world from one sector he found the constraint was not the number of hours practiced, but the number of hours you could maintain and sustain full concentration. If you could not sustain concentration, you were wasting your time.

Who observes that concentration level for you – yes, your coach. Go get one.

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