

The Talent Code

by

Daniel Coyle

A book Review By Tom Butler



You know the one about how to get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice. Daniel Coyle in his superb book “The Talent Code” explores how “greatness isn’t born, it’s grown” and that playing in Carnegie Hall may not be so far fetched after all. Coyle’s premise is that through what he calls “deep practice, ignition and master coaching”, average individuals can accomplish extraordinary things. He delves into the reason the Brazilians continue to leave the world gasping at its bottomless reservoir of soccer talent. He also visits a dilapidated indoor tennis court in Moscow and unearths why at any one point there are more Russians from this one club in the men’s and women’s WTA top 10 than any other country...combined. Why the Oakland Raiders sought out a junior high coach to tell them who to pick as the NFL’s #1 draft pick and also visits a camp in upstate NY that consistently produces world class musicians.

The hero in his book is a thing called myelin, which basically is insulation that wraps itself around the nerves as learning is taking place. The more intense the learning experience, the more myelin wraps occur. The myelin is there to stay so practice doesn’t just make perfect, it makes permanent. Ever have the anxiety that our legs won’t know what to do when we get off the lift on the first day of the season but yet they somehow know exactly what to do? Myelin has our back. Thick wraps of this creates what Coyle calls “natural broadband” and the more practice, the more myelin, the faster and stronger the signals travel along this broadband to get the muscles working. How much practice though? Roughly 10,000 repetitions of a single part of a movement to get that broadband installed. So I lied a bit, practice doesn’t make perfect...perfect practice makes perfect.

Reading this book had me thinking with each story that Coyle tells how I can apply his examples to teaching skiing. Two of the reasons for Brazil’s dominance is due to playing on smaller fields and courts with a heavier ball. This increases the speed at which the sport is played and players need to create ways to handle the ball to compensate for the change. To play and practice on a full sized pitch reduces the need to react and move as quickly. Think about the way we ski, how we practice when we are at our home mountain. Why does that kid keep hiking the park to hit the same rail all day every day?

Because he wants to nail the trick so he can build on it and go bigger. The Mahres used to set slalom courses and repeatedly hike after school at home in White Pass Washington. They invented a way to ski faster based on the technology and course setting of the time, which ended up being called “the White Pass turn”. Nobody told them how to do it; they just figured it out because it worked.

The Russian tennis players at the Spartak Tennis Club learned flawless technique from the very beginning of their lessons. Many of the lessons in the beginning, month’s worth, never even involve a ball or sometimes even a racquet and were done painstakingly slow. Once again think about how we practice at home. Do we do it slowly or regular speed or high speed? Can you realistically commit a movement to memory by bombing down a hill? Stenmark, after finishing his training runs used to ski drills very slowly to the lift. He didn’t waste an inch of hill space such was his desire to improve. By this example it occurs to me that it doesn’t really matter how big or small your resort is, just how you utilize the terrain available via tasks and imagination that either helps or hinders you.

A skiing or riding scenario can match every story Coyle writes about. What was eye opening for me was how I can apply these techniques to my students and leave them not only with a sense of accomplishment, but perhaps a little more myelin in the bank to help them down the road. This is an extraordinary book. It is an empowering notion that we can truly surpass what we thought was possible in whatever we set our sights on. While reading some criticism of the book, some reviewers dispelled the notion that genius or super athleticism could be learned, that Einstein, or Jordan, or Leonardo couldn’t possibly have peers let alone ones who learned their way up to equals in their respective fields. However Johan Sebastian Bach, a musical genius in his own right commented once on his success that, “I have done well; anyone who works equally as hard will do equally as well”.