

## INTRODUCTION TO TALENT DEVELOPMENT EXCERPTS

Is talent born or made? At first glance, it looks like talent is born. Consider prodigies like Wolfgang Mozart, Pablo Picasso, and Bobby Fischer. Mozart learned to play the piano at age three and the violin at age four. At age five, he began composing. Soon he composed regularly and performed in Europe's leading concert halls. Picasso the child painted like an adult. American author Gertrude Stein said that young Picasso "wrote paintings as other children wrote their A, B, Cs." Picasso said, "I never drew like a child. When I was twelve, I drew like Raphael." When Fischer was fourteen, he became the youngest U.S. Chess Champion. When he was sixteen, he became the youngest player ever to earn the grandmaster title. Such talent so young suggests that some must be born with talent, perhaps a gift from the gods.

Look more closely, though, and talent appears made even among these prodigies. Both Mozart and Picasso were raised and tutored by fathers already accomplished in the respective talent areas. Mozart's father, Leopold, was a successful composer, violinist, and assistant concert master at the Salzburg court. He had also written a book on violin instruction the year Mozart was born. Leopold was devoted to teaching Mozart and insisted that his son practice hard and achieve perfection. Picasso was instructed in art by his father, Jose Ruiz Blasco, who taught drawing at various art schools. Fisher's parents were not chess players, but Fisher was raised in New York City, a chess Mecca, where Fischer learned from elite players who frequented the same local chess clubs he did. Moreover, Fischer worked hard at chess. He sat for hours at the board and thoughtfully played both sides of games. He solved chess puzzles using a pocket chess set as he rode the bus to and from school. He taught himself Russian so he could voraciously read Russian chess literature. He often hid chess books inside his school

books so he could study chess while in school. Fischer left school during lunch periods to play chess with a chess master who lived nearby. After school, he'd head to one of the local chess clubs and often stay there late into the night until his mother found him and dragged him home. At age sixteen, Fischer dropped out of school to study chess full time. He was a child consumed by chess.

Look closer still and it appears that Mozart, Picasso, and Fischer, although prodigious, were far from their talent peaks as children. All of them worked at their crafts for many years before making talent breakthroughs. And, they were hardly alone on the long road to talent development. Psychologist John Hayes investigated many talented composers and artists to determine the time interval from one's introduction to a talent domain to one's first truly great accomplishment. Hayes discovered there was a ten-year rule. That is, no outstanding composer or artist—even the prodigious Mozart or Picasso—created a work judged significant in fewer than ten years, with some taking closer to twenty years. The same held true for Fischer and other chess grandmasters. Even with all his passion, dedication, and resources, Fischer did not earn the world title until he was twenty-nine years old. Researchers studying chess grandmasters confirm that most only attain the grandmaster title after about 32,000 hours of intensive study. Do the math: That's intensive study eight hours a day, seven days a week, for over eleven years.

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The road to expertise usually begins early in a child's life. My own research reveals musicians beginning musical training as toddlers, figure skaters starting at age two or three, baton twirlers starting between ages two and four, and a writer learning to read at age three. In

some cases, this early start comes about because children are born into the talent area; parents or siblings are already immersed in the talent domain. Such was the case for Mozart and Picasso. Some of the talented musicians, artists, and athletes Bloom studied were also born into households where the talent area was already in force. One tennis parent said, “We always kidded that our daughter woke up in a car bed, next to the tennis courts, hearing the ping-pong of tennis balls—that was one of the first sounds she recollects probably...We belonged to a tennis club and played tennis all weekend.”

In one study, I interviewed the parents of twenty-four nationally recognized children spanning several talent domains and found that twenty-two of them personally introduced their child to the talent domain. Among those twenty-two parents, some were paid instructors or high-level competitors; others pursued the talent area as a hobby. One parent was University of Nebraska volleyball coach John Cook. Coach Cook was National Coach of the Year and has guided his Nebraska team to four national championships. His daughter, Lauren, was a first-team All American player at Nebraska. Coach Cook said, “I think my daughter had an advantage because of my job. She’s been in the gym a lot. She grew up around volleyball. When she was a little kid, she was playing with balloons in the basement. We set up a mini court and would play on our knees.” The parent of a cello player described her musical household, “We always played music in the house, all kinds of music, classical, Beatles, all kinds. We always provided an avenue for the children to enjoy music and play instruments.”

Sometimes it is not parents who set the talent-initiation stage but siblings. In my interviews with gold medal Olympic speed skaters Bonnie Blair and Dan Jansen, I learned that both were raised in homes where their older siblings were already enthusiastic and

accomplished speed skaters. Blair, who was the youngest of six children, said, “When I was born, it wasn’t a matter of when I was going to be a skater, it was how quickly could they get me on skates.” She began skating at age two and was racing by age four. Jansen was the youngest of nine speed skating children. He believes that having so many older siblings who skated was crucial to his early start in skating and how far he progressed in the sport. Jansen said that he and his siblings were simply “given a pair of skates and off we went.” Weekends were spent traveling with family to speed skating meets, and for Jansen, “It was a fun thing to do with my entire family.”

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Early experience can jumpstart a child on the road to Carnegie Hall, but only practice, practice, and more practice can deliver her. As indicated earlier, talented people practice a lot for ten or more years to achieve expertise in a domain. Just as important as the extent of practice is the nature of practice. Talented people practice the right way. Their practice is deliberate.

I am yet to meet a truly talented performer who has not spent many years and thousands of hours practicing, even at the high-school level. National High School Rodeo Champion Jayde Atkins has been riding horses since she was two years old and practices every day after school until dark. State champion swimmers Olivia Calegan and Caroline Thiel swim twice a day and about four hours a day in total. Six-time world champion baton twirler Steffany Lien started practicing at age four and has practiced tens of thousands of hours since. Her mother Susan said, “We sometimes spend five or six hours a day in the gym. We usually split that time into two practices, so we’re in the gym twice a day. It’s just part of our rhythm of the

day to go to the gym and practice. Even on Christmas Eve, we figure out how we're going to get into some gym in the morning before it closes."

Psychologist Benjamin Bloom also found that heavy practice loads distinguish top American performers from others—even those with similar genetic stuff. In many families Bloom studied, the talented child's siblings enjoyed the same early experiences and enriched opportunities to excel. But rarely did a sibling even come close to the accomplishment level of the more talented sibling Bloom studied. This was true even when the talented child's brother or sister seemed to possess more natural ability early on. In the end, parents reported, the one who excelled was the one who practiced most.

Caroline Thiel, a Nebraska State High School Swim Champion, is a deliberate practice proponent. Thiel said, "Some days in practice you're just so exhausted. You're sore and your entire body aches, and it's hard to find motivation. But you remember your goals and you find motivation. You push through each 100-, 50-, or 25-yard sprint. Your brain shuts down but your body keeps going through the muscle aches and heavy breathing and throwing up. People don't realize how hard swimming is and how hard we practice. People think that you just get in the pool and swim a few laps."

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My hack golfing days finally passed when I started practicing golf shots more deliberately. But, I couldn't practice that way until I better understood the game of golf, and that didn't happen until I began golf lessons. Under the tutelage of a golf coach, I learned how to practice. The coach identified and repaired subtle flaws in my game. He'd say things like, "Try holding the club on the other end and with two hands," and "It's best to remove those head

covers before striking the ball.” Little adjustments like that helped me practice better and improve. I joke, of course, but the importance of coaches and mentors is instrumental in talent development.

My own research generally confirms a mentoring hierarchy where children begin with a talent-introduction mentor and progress to one or more talent-mastery mentors. One chess parent commented on her son’s first coach: “He was a wonderful coach...he really got the kids to laugh and enjoy.” The parent reported that coach and student often ate jelly beans and watched cartoons before playing chess. That chess student and every other chess player I studied was eventually mentored by an elite coach who was a top-ranked player.

In music, violinist Will Hagen, the highest American ranked violinist since 1985, progressed through several mentors since his violin introduction at age three. William was first mentored at age four. William’s mother reported: “His first teacher said, “Wow, there is really something here,” and she encouraged us after a short while to take William to a different teacher who worked with young talented students.” The family heeded the advice and moved on to a more qualified teacher. At age ten, William changed mentors again and began working with Robert Lipsett at the Colburn Community School of Performing Arts in Los Angeles. William and his mother would fly there weekly from their home in Utah. After being mentored by Lipsett for several years, William studied for two years with the world’s top violinist, Itzhak Perlman, at the famed Julliard School of Music in New York.

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Budding stars often gravitate to centers of excellence, talent hotbeds, to work with the best mentors and other rising stars who flock there. Musician Mozart and psychoanalyst

Sigmund Freud gravitated to Vienna, Europe's intellectual hub. Painter Picasso went to Paris, the center for the arts. Dancer Martha Graham sashayed from California to New York, the center for dance. Today, budding musicians gravitate to New York's Julliard School of Music, while budding technology geeks head to California's Silicon Valley, and tomorrow's engineers head to MIT. Tennis prodigies head to tennis academies such as the former Bollettieri Tennis Academy in Bradenton, FL, where Bollettieri and other top coaches honed the skills of eventual tennis champions like Andre Agassi, Jim Courier, Maria Sharapova, and Martina Hingis. And, chess players still gravitate to New York City hoping to become the next Bobby Fischer, or they study at colleges with elite chess programs such as University of Texas at Dallas, where my son Keaton attended college.

In my own investigations, the family of one Olympic figure skater moved 200 miles to Colorado Springs so that their son could train with an elite coach and other elite skaters. And, elite speed skaters and skating coaches in the 1970s and 1980s flocked to Milwaukee, home of the only full-sized Olympic skating oval. Sometimes parents create centers of excellence at home for their talented children. Rodeo rider Jayde Atkins' family ranch in central Nebraska was a rodeo hotbed. She had the perfect training ground, coaches, and nearby rodeo competitions at her disposal. And talented chess players and baton twirlers' parents invited elite coaches to visit their homes for extended periods to provide concentrated training for their children.

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Psychologist Benjamin Bloom said it is not enough for the child to commit to the talent area, other supporters must as well. No child can attain mastery without support, and that support usually comes from parents.

Parents of talented youngsters assume a managerial role. They arrange and monitor lessons, plan practice and competition schedules, make travel arrangements, access materials, and accompany the child to events, many of which are across country or overseas. They also play the role of accountant, fundraiser, secretary, hairdresser, costume maker, press agent, medical assistant, dietician, chauffeur, school liaison, videographer, and gopher. One chess parent nicely summed up the managerial role parents play: "My son calls me his agent. That's kind of what I feel like. I do all the planning and everything else and he just gets on the plane or in the car and we go." The parent of an Olympic figure skater remarked: "I'm the one who signed him up for ballet and off-ice conditioning. I was involved in the costume design and finding the costume maker...and helping narrow down music choices for the program. I contact specialists...I do all drug testing paperwork, flight arrangements, hotel arrangements, rental cars...I am like his personal secretary. I'm his assistant. For half the day, all I do is skating work." Parents don't just manage their child's talent; they foot the bill and make many sacrifices to do so. Most families I studied probably spend \$10,000 or more on annual costs.

To foot these heavy costs, families make great sacrifices such as borrowing money, foregoing retirement savings, living in smaller homes, and taking second jobs. A skating mom bluntly said, "This is an ungodly expensive sport. I can't tell you how many times we mortgaged our house." A cello player's mom remarked, "We decided that money wasn't going to keep him from a certain teacher. So, we lived off borrowed money for a time."

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It is unreasonable to think that schools should take the lead in talent development. Schools have plenty on their plate trying to give a wide range of students a general education. Moreover, there is not as much instructional time available as one might believe. Consider these figures. During a year, a child attends school 20% of the time, is asleep 30% of the time, and is potentially awake in the home 50% of the time. Moreover, a school provides just 600 hours of academic instruction per year—about 3.25 hours daily over 180 days. Given these figures, it is parents who hold the learning and talent development keys. They potentially regulate half the child’s day. A parent can provide 62% more instruction beyond that of school by working with the child or securing a mentor just one hour per day throughout the year. Two hours of daily home instruction more than doubles a school’s instructional contribution. Of course, if the child is not yet school age, parents potentially regulate 70% of the child’s day. Parents—far more than schools—have opportunity to foster talent.

School reformist and talent author Ken Robinson contends that schools do not focus on the entire child but instead focus on the child from the shoulders up and slightly to the left. That is, they focus on relaying core subjects like math, science, and language and ignore other talent pockets such as the visual and performing arts. It’s as if schools are trying to rear a bunch of college professors who, Robinson jokes, “look upon their bodies solely as a form of transport for their heads. It’s a way of getting their heads to meetings.”