

Pound the Rock! What the San Antonio Spurs Can Teach Us About Getting 1% Better Every Day

by John O'Sullivan / Wednesday, 07 February 2018 /

One of the most successful sporting franchises across the globe the last few decades is the San Antonio Spurs of the NBA. With five NBA titles since 1999, 22 overall division titles, having won at least 50 games for 18 consecutive seasons, and having missed the playoffs only 4 times in their history, the Spurs and their coach Gregg Popovich are models of consistent excellence. So how do they do it? *They “pound the rock.”*

As Daniel Coyle tells us in his fantastic new book *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*, when you walk into the Spurs facility, you see a giant rock and hammer. Then you see the following quote, written in the five native languages of Spurs players, adorning the walls:

“When nothing seems to help, I go look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it, but all that had gone before.” – Jacob Riis

Practice after practice, day after day, season after season, the Spurs pound the rock. They get 1% better every day. They know that the first one hundred blows may not yield the outcome they hope for, but only through one hundred unsuccessful blows will come the one that cracks the rock, the one breakthrough victory, the next world title. Ask any Spurs player what it is all about to be a member of that team, and they will all tell you:

POUND THE ROCK!

We live in a world where some people believe that high-level athletic performance is easy and that people are born with talent and greatness. They don't see Steph Curry and Kobe Bryant showing up early and staying late. They don't see Cristiano Ronaldo having to be dragged off the field by Alex Ferguson when he was 18 years old, as he was determined to be the greatest player ever. They don't see the work, the struggle and disappointment Nick Foles persevered through to become the 2018 Super Bowl MVP.

They think there is such a thing as an overnight success story. There is not. All these athletes pound the rock. Hour after hour, day after day, they put in the work so that when their moment comes, they are ready. Only 100 failed attempts will yield the one that breaks the stone.

Only 100 hard practices will yield the one that tells you “Yes, I got it!” Are you willing to pound the rock? Because if you are, you are way ahead of the game. Most people are not. They want immediate mastery. They want all the accolades without most of the sweat. They want to hit the rock on the first blow and have it break.

Realistically, what a waste of time. If your metaphorical rock is so feeble that it cracks on the first try, the success will be ephemeral. That is not getting out of your comfort zone or pushing your limits. Go ahead, schedule the easy teams, go 10-0 season after season, that is not where champions want to be. They want to pound the rock. They understand that change is hard, but is worth the effort. They are willing to come up short again and again, knowing that 100 failures lead to the one successful blow that breaks through.

When Ashton Eaton was a senior in high school, his track coaches called him aside and told him “Ashton, the University of Oregon wants to give you a scholarship for the decathlon!” His answer? “What is the decathlon?” He had not attempted 7 out of the 10 events.

Eighteen months later, he nails it. Four years later, he is the 2012 Olympic Gold Medalist, a feat he repeated in Rio in 2016. Throw in a couple of World Championships and World Records, and you have one of the greatest athletes of all time. How did he get there? He pounded the rock.

The world is full of people looking for a shortcut to the top. There are none. There is only one way to have your best season ever.

Pound the rock!

Pound the rock!