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Virtuosity and Intensity, as Simple, Elegant Solutions to a Complex Challenge

It is a common Coaches' motto--Plagiarize shamelessly. We do this with drills, sets, philosophy, everything. Over many years I've collected, reviewed, used, tossed out, brought back and revised ideas and incorporated them into my broader thoughts on coaching athletes.

In February 2013, I was able to participate in a CrossFit Level 1 trainers' course. During this two day seminar, specific language was used that fit directly in line with my theories as a coach. From this seminar, I was able to make more concrete the ideas I discuss below.

Intensity applied with Virtuosity is a recipe for fantastic achievement.

That sounds so...elegant. Not elegant in it's first definition (a refined quality of gracefulness and good taste); rather the second definition: Cleverly simple; ingenious. Elegance is what happens when one removes the clutter of the surrounding world and the essential ideas remain.

In gymnastics, completing a routine without error will not earn a perfect score, only a 9.4. To score the elusive 10.0, one must demonstrate "risk, originality and virtuosity" while making no mistakes in execution.

Risk is simply executing a movement that is likely to be missed, attempting the challenging. Originality is a movement unique to the athlete, a move or sequence never seen before.

Virtuosity is defined as "performing the common, uncommonly well."

Unlike risk and originality, virtuosity is elusive yet immediately recognizable. It is also the key to that last .2 of a point. More importantly, it is a demonstration of true mastery, genius and beauty.

All three are vital to high levels of achievement, however virtuosity forms the foundation and framework on which all great successes are built.

In any endeavor--swimming, piano, sculpture, science--there is a compelling desire amongst novices to quickly move past the fundamentals and onto the more elaborate, more sophisticated movements, skills or techniques. The compulsion to rush away from mastery and onto originality and risk is the curse of the novice. This curse is marked by excessive adornment (fancy hands on recovery anyone?), unnecessary creativity (have you heard a 10 & Under's race plan?) and unfortunately, if not checked early on, a lack of virtuosity and a delay of mastery.

The skills, techniques and ultimately, the opportunities that athletes learn, earn and need vary based on one's current level of mastery, one's ultimate goals and the path between those things.

Take, for example, the breaststroke pullout. It is a simple, powerful move comprised of an arm pull and a kick, completed at the start of every breaststroke length. At the highest level of competition, it is performed with the inclusion of one downward dolphin motion (dolphin kick). We choose not to teach the dolphin kick to the majority of our 12 & Under swimmers because learning the when and how overtakes the importance of mastering the most powerful part, the pullout itself. Yet it is one of the most requested "skills" from our young athletes. Why? Because it's flashy. It's "cool," it's risky, it's advanced.

It is guaranteed, however, that the swimmer with the best dolphin-free pullout will be the swimmer with the best dolphin-ful pullout. This is why, when asked "when can we learn the dolphin kick pullout", our young 10 & Unders are told "when you get to Coach Chris's group." The athletes must learn the basics well before the adornment begins.

Virtuosity is gained through uncompromising attention to detail everyday. Athletes are nervous when they step onto the blocks at a meet. Many times, their mind shuts off. Whatever they do on a daily basis comes out in the pool. A technical DQ in May is most likely a product of what an athlete was doing in December. Consistently practicing perfect movements hardwires good movement. Virtuosity is gained through persistent practice.

Now-a-days, athletes at the top of this sport can be seen at the top of many events. Missy Franklin, Ryan Lochte, Caitlin Leverenz all can be found in the top 10 of the US in multiple events outside of their so-called primary events. Matt Grevers is entered in the 100 Butterfly next week at WCT. He's the reigning Olympic Champion in the 100 backstroke. Missy can be found in the 200 IM next week. Her "weakest" event. She has a shot to make the team in it. Her "weakest" event. This is because they strive for virtuosity every day in training. They do what they do with such intensity, such focus in all arenas that their potential is limited only by their willingness to take on the risk.

Every aspect of our sport requires grace, finesse and technical proficiency. Watching young swimmers practicing a newly learned skill, you can almost see new neuro-pathways being created in the look of concentration, focus and intensity on their faces. A season or two later, those same athletes have gained 'enough' proficiency ("I MADE MY FIRST CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL!" "I'M AT SECTIONALS!!!!"), the intense faces fade and the pursuit shifts from technical proficiency to beating the clock. While it does have a great use, the lure of the clock is hard to resist (for athletes and coaches) and it's all too tempting just to focus on getting to the wall first. Unfortunately the complacent athlete who fails to focus on their virtuosity will have capped their potential.

Another unfortunate truth is that when athletes find something that works, when they do something that can truly make them better, they quit doing it. Why? Because it's hard...That's why it works. Which brings me to intensity.

Athletic research has repeatedly shown that intensity is the single most important component of the prescription for transformation. It determines both the type of adaptation and the amount of adaptation to training. But what is intensity? How does one define and quantify it?

Intensity (what we call “Hard Work”) can be defined in several different ways. For the sake of this moment, we use the following equation-

The amount of investment x The amount of challenge=Level of Intensity.

I have been described as intense, and I’ll take that title. I am extremely invested, and I love to challenge and to be challenged.

My favored method of increasing intensity is by increasing investment. The challenge remains the same; but when one is more invested in reaching their goal, their focus increases and the intensity rises. This, however, is the athlete’s game--only the athlete controls what their output is each day. The coaches, the parents, the teammates all can highlight *why* one should be more invested (should they is an entirely other question). This does not mean the athlete will buy into it.

On the other hand, the coaches’ game is the amount of challenge. Amount may be the wrong word, as it implies volume, duration, etc. These are all easy ways of challenging an athlete, certainly. Add 30 minutes, or 2000 more yards to any practice and clearly, the challenge rises. Instead of relying on the easy, a coach must rely on the elegant. They write prescriptions that increase challenge by demanding higher quality movement, higher quality movement with more frequency, at faster speeds, and yes on occasion and at the right times, for higher volume or longer duration.

Intensity is transformational, in all directions. Transformation comes from responding to challenges. It can transform an interested young athlete into an Olympian.

Or a couch potato.

The difference lies in the variables being used to determine intensity, and how the athlete responds to it.

An uninvested athlete, faced with a significant challenge, is likely to back down, or turn away.

An athlete, invested in many different, unchallenging obstacles, is merely mastering the art of being busy.

Both ways are transformative, neither in a very positive way.

In “The Talent Code,” author Daniel Coyle speaks of a balance that coaches and pupils should strive for in practice. Attempting a challenge that is just challenging enough to elicit failure, but manageable enough to overcome with the correct mindset (or investment). The learning comes from the intensity of walking that tightrope. Failure is no longer seen as failure, but a lesson learned. On the pool deck, I describe it as “a baby learning to walk”.

Confronting a challenge head on with the investment required, regardless of the outcome, requires mental toughness.

Mental toughness is the ability to continue according to plan in a way that is in line with your values even though negative thoughts and emotions are pulling you in another direction. Let me say that again: mental toughness is the ability to continue according to plan in a way that is in line with your values *even though negative thoughts and emotions are pulling you in another direction*. Negative thoughts will always exist, toughness comes from recognizing those for what they are and moving beyond them.

Confronting a challenge head on with the investment required, regardless of outcome, also helps to develop mental toughness.

This positive feedback loop is what coaches strive to create, by appropriately applying stimulus (intensity) based on the current level of mastery of the athlete, the athlete's ultimate goals and the path between those things.

Possessing the mental toughness (investment) to tackle an intense challenge helps to develop more mental toughness (investment) to take on more intense challenges. This positive feedback loop allows an athlete to overcome and shatter, through sheer exertion of will, the fallacy of the immovable object by becoming the unstoppable force.

The ability to identify one's own weaknesses and accept the vulnerability associated with fixing those deficiencies is rare. It's more common to avoid weaknesses, amplify strengths and hope that practice happens to favor one's specialties. To be one of the very best, an athlete has to be comfortable with setting aside his ego and working past mental and physical weaknesses. Novice and top athletes alike have to be comfortable with experiencing short-term failure to achieve long-term success. It is through this struggle that virtuosity is able to be achieved.

Elegance: Cleverly simple; ingenious.

Elegance is what happens when one removes the clutter of the surrounding world and the essential ideas remain.

Every problem has an elegant solution.

Go to school.

Come to practice.

Focus on fundamentals.

Work Hard.

Be Humble.

Be Honest.

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