

The Rocky Road of Excellence

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“How many of you want to be a college athlete?” I asked this question to 3,000 middle school students in Southern California recently. In all, about 1,000 kids raised their hands.

“What about an artist? A singer? What about a musician?” Maybe 500 students raised their hands.

“What about running a business? Raise your hand if you want to someday own your own business.” 1,500 future entrepreneurs put their hand up.

“How many of you want to go to college?” Almost every hand went up.

“Simple questions, right?” They nod. I continued, “Many people ask themselves ‘what do I want to do in life?’ But I want to let you in on a secret. Many people never end up following their passion, or working in a field they truly love, or achieving excellence in sport or academics. Most people are unfulfilled because they ask themselves the wrong essential question. They ask ‘what do I want to do?’”

“‘What do I want to do’ is not very helpful question to ask.” I pause and make eye contact with a few students. “Why? Because it elicits answers such as ‘I want to go to college’ or ‘I want to be a college athlete’ or ‘I want to have a great job.’ But everybody wants those things. That question doesn’t make you any different from the 99%.”

What was I getting at here?

“Elite performers, those who are true professionals at everything they do, ask themselves a far different question. They don’t ask “What do I want?” They ask:

“What am I willing to sacrifice for, to struggle for, and to experience pain and discomfort for? In other words, what dream or passion am I willing to suffer for?”

This question is what leads to excellence in sport, in business, and in life.

The truly elite athlete, the elite musician or top business professional, knows that in order to achieve greatness, you must sacrifice. Most of the young athletes I meet want to play at a high level, but they live in the comfortable world and have no clue what must be sacrificed in order to even have a chance to make it to the top. Most live in a world where they are not challenged, not pushed, and rarely experience struggle. When they do experience adversity, they leave their team, complain to mom and dad, and blame coaches or teachers for making things difficult

They fail to learn life’s most important lesson:

You must risk being uncomfortable to achieve something worthwhile. You must forgo your safety net and go all in if you are truly passionate about pursuing a goal or a dream. You might have to leave your friends and play on a team that provides a better environment. You must be willing to get up and train before school, to arrive early and stay after training, to do more than everyone else, usually when no one is watching.

Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi left home at age 11 and 12 respectively, in pursuit of an environment that matched their dreams. They train harder than anyone else, not because it makes life easier, but because they want something so badly they are willing to suffer for it.

Speedskater Stephen Bradbury went to four Olympics, suffered horrible injuries and disappointment, yet was the last man standing in his last Olympic final and claimed a gold medal.

Stephen Curry may be the best basketball player on the planet today, but he has overcome multiple injuries and surgeries to do so. He didn't just start showing up early and training harder and longer than everyone else. He has been doing it for years, long before any of us ever heard of him. As Alan Stein says in this great video, "do the habits you have today match the dreams you have for tomorrow?"

Heck, what if your son or daughter was an overlooked and under-appreciated player like Jay DeMerit, who jumped from college soccer to an English Pub league to scoring the winning goal to send Watford to the English Premier League, and finally representing the US at the 2010 World Cup. (Check out this trailer from a movie about his life). Would he or she live in an attic, and have no money to their name, yet train every single day in case their one chance, their one opportunity, fell into their lap?

Let's bring this closer to home. If your son or daughter wants to be a college athlete (notice I say that THEY WANT to be a college athlete, not if you want it for them), what are they willing to suffer for? Do they get up early and stay late? Do they miss a party or two on the weekends with their friends? Do they rehab from injuries and come back better? Do they embrace coaches and teachers who demand excellence, and will not lower their standards for them? If they want to be great, those are the things they must choose to embrace.

The research actually backs this up. Former Team Great Britain and current Chelsea FC performance coach Dave Collins (who coined the title of this article) and I had the chance to catch up on a recent trip to the UK. As Dave says, "In our research, it seems that it's a rocky road to the top, and in actuality talent NEEDS trauma."

In their research on elite and near elite performers, or what they call "Super Champs" and "Champs," Collins and his colleague Aine MacNamara have found that those who make it to the very top, who play internationally and have the greatest success, have a path filled with struggle. They are presented with both on field and real life struggle, disappointment, and at times pain, yet they persevere. "The talent pathway," they conclude, "should not be a comfortable place to be."

Collins and MacNamara have also found that well-timed character and psychologically based interventions from coaches and supportive adults help these athletes develop coping skills, grit and resilience. In other words, it is not our job to smooth the pathway of our athletes, to give them plush fields, carry their gear for them, and remove all obstacles from their supposed path to greatness. In fact, it's quite the opposite. But it is our job to help them learn from struggle, and see that the path to the top is not supposed to be easy.

If we really want to help our athletes, students, musicians, and entrepreneurs achieve something great, we need to make sure the path is filled with potholes.

These days I run into so many athletes and parents who think that their child can have everything without sacrificing anything. They want success and high achievement, yet they want comfort and a lack of adversity. Their parents don't hold them accountable for their actions and shield them from experiencing failure. They resist when coaches try hold them to high standards and push them to a new level. They show up late and hold back at practice. They don't even carry their own gear to and from the field. Yet, they have their eyes set on a scholarship and making it to the pros.

They live in a dream world.

Unless you're willing to give something up, unless you're willing to suffer, unless you're willing to break a few bones, you'll never get what you passionately want.

Are you ready to do it differently? To walk the path of elite performance? If so, here is some guidance.

If you are an athlete ask yourself this question: "What am I willing to give up, suffer for and fight for because I want it so bad?" If you can answer that question, if you know what your dreams are, I encourage you to pursue them with the greatest passion you have ever pursued anything before. The journey is worth it.

If you are a coach, you must give your team and players some accountability. Hold them to a high standard. Give them a say in the solution. Teach them to be a great teammate, to ask "what can I give" and not "what do I get." But most importantly, when you make it tough for them, be there afterwards to help them debrief, to understand WHY something happened, and how it can be good. Creating difficulty and struggle in a kid's life and then turning your back on that kid is not coaching. It may even be bullying. So please, make it hard, but make it a learning experience, not a losing experience.

Finally, if you are a parent, the only way your son or daughter will ever passionately pursue a dream and be willing to suffer and sacrifice in order to achieve it is if that dream belongs to them. They must own this experience. They must pursue their passion. They must not be protected from losses, from disappointments, from challenges and from situations that make them feel uncomfortable. In fact, you must be strong and help them seek such scenarios out without forcing your will on them. (As a parent myself, I know it isn't easy!). And when they fall, be there to help them get up and learn, to see the big picture, and fight another day.

Only through overcoming adversity and swimming in the struggle will your children ever achieve anything great.

The next time one of your athletes or one of your kids tells you what they want to do in life have the courage to say "I'm sorry but you're asking the wrong question."

Get their attention, make eye contact, and say:

"What you really need to be asking is 'what am I willing to sacrifice in order to achieve something great?'"

That is the question that leads to elite performance in school, in sport and in life.

Because it's a rocky road to the top.

Sources:

Dave Collins and Aine MacNamara: "The Rocky Road to the Top: Why Talent Needs Trauma." Sports Med 2012; 42 (11), 907-914

Dave Collins, Aine MacNamara and Neil McCarthy: "[Super Champions, Champions and Almosts: Important Differences and Commonalities on the Rocky Road.](#)" Frontiers in Psychology, 11 January 2016