

News for Swim Parents

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“Normal People Don’t Do Deliberate Practice”

Guy Edson, ASCA Staff

First of all, there is nothing wrong with being “normal”--- it’s just that in athletics, and in scholarship, and in arts, and in business, and in charity, and in faith, and in relationships we take note of the EXTRA-ordinary person, sometimes with a bit of envy, but more often with a big smile, being happy for the person and what they have been able to accomplish. What sets apart the normal from the extra-ordinary is oftentimes the result of deliberate practice.

Psychologist K. Anders Ericsson, a professor of Psychology at Florida State University, has been a pioneer in researching deliberate practice and what it means. According to Ericsson: "People believe that because expert performance is qualitatively different from normal performance the expert performer must be endowed with characteristics qualitatively different from those of normal adults... We agree that expert performance is qualitatively different from normal performance and even that expert performers have characteristics and abilities that are qualitatively different from or at least outside the range of those of normal adults. However, we deny that these differences are immutable, that is, due to innate talent. ...we argue that the differences between expert performers and normal adults reflect a life-long period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain."

“deliberate effort”

One of Ericsson's core findings is that how expert one becomes at a skill has more to do with how one practices than with merely performing a skill a large number of times. An expert breaks down the skills that are required to be expert and focuses on improving those skill chunks during practice or day-to-day activities, often paired with immediate coaching feedback.

One time I said to our senior team, “We are now going to do 39 turns and in between each turn you have about 18 yards of swimming for deliberate, and conscious thought to evaluate your turn and make an adjustment for the next one.” Most just swam a 1000 free.

Swimming is sometimes too coach dominated taking away the opportunity for the athletes to connect the dots on their own. Counsilman said, During the initial learning stage the person much use the higher centers of his brain (the cerebral cortex) to perform the movement. He literally thinks out his task."

"THINKS OUT THE TASK."

Over the years I have had a handful of swimmers who deliberately practiced. They often get in the water early or stay late. They try new things. They're conscious. They show me things and they ask questions. They remind me of great basketball players who go to the gym for a few hours when no one else is around and practice deliberate hoop shooting.

Sorry to say that for most swimmers it's just "swim a thousand free." But for the extra-ordinary ones it's, "39 deliberate turns, thinking and evaluating." Ready go."

Guy Edson has been on staff of the American Swimming Coaches Association since 1988 and is a part time swimming coach with a local club team.