

ISSN 1652-7224 :: Published 23 September 2009
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Whatever “It” is, it’s Not Simple: A Review of Four Books on Talent

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In contemporary Western Society, which to a great extent is built on meritocratic ideals, talent is highly rated. In the production of goods and services, it is crucial for competitive edge to identify, attract and develop talents, in the specialized workforce as well as in administration, sales and corporate management. The concept *talent management* is used for this particular form of staff recruitment and skill enhancement (also known as Human Resource Management, HRM). But the hunt for talent does not begin or end in traditional industry. The word talent makes most of us think of the world of entertainment, or rather the entertainment business, where talented artist of all kinds constitute the prerequisite for profitable enterprise. Talent hunts in the form of amateur competitions is taking place on different levels, with the likes of the CBS show *American Idol* on the top level. Specialized talent scouts spend every day, all year round, on soccer arenas and other sporting grandstands across the world in order to get their hands on a new Ronaldinho or Zlatan, Isinbaeva or del Potro. The hunt for talents is constant and ubiquitous, in fashion, film and theater, dance and song, science and politics.

Notwithstanding the varying content of the concept of talent, there are common traits that can be subject to systematic study. And there is indeed a large number of more or less scientific studies on talent, which Sanna Nordin discovered when she assumed the position as Research Fellow at Laban, world leading music and dance conservatory in Deptford, South London, where she will study talent development. Facing the need to update her knowledge in the field, Dr. Nordin offered to present this Forum with a literature review for which she picked four books with various degrees of scholarship and divergent approaches to the subject matter: *The Road to Excellence: The Acquisition of Expert Performance in the Arts and Sciences, Sports and Games* edited by K. Anders Ericsson (Psychology Press 1996); *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Kevin Rathunde & Samuel Whalen (Cambridge University Press 1997); *Sports Talent: How to Identify and Develop Outstanding Athletes* by Jim Brown (Human Kinetics 2001); and *Talent is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else* by Geoff Colvin (Nicholas Brealey Publishing 2008). The identification and nurturing of talent are treated in a wide range of fields of performance, sports, chess, art, literature, medical practice, reading, etc. The pivotal question in talent theory is whether the skill is innate or acquired, and what factors might influence talent development one way or the other. The authors involved tend to pull in different directions, but Sanna Nordin is a skillful guide in this, mainly psychological, field, and in her stimulating and learned account she emphasizes, with good reason, the complexity of the talent phenomenon.

Commencing a new position to do with the development of talent among young dancers, I felt it was time to update my knowledge on talent identification and development also in other, related fields such as sport, art, school and work. There are, of course, a vast number of original sources in the form of journal articles that delve into these topics in great depth, but I was also curious as to how talent is portrayed in more or less academic, more or less mass-marketed books. This quest initially led me to four books and it was my hope that by reading and reviewing them all, I would begin to get a closer grip on what this much-desired and much-discussed yet somewhat elusive concept really meant. What is talent? How important is it? And is it mainly about nature and innate differences, or nurture and supportive environments? The reading proved to be an interesting rollercoaster, ranging from the simplistic to the bewilderingly complex via what was largely both thought-provoking and enjoyable. Luckily for me, all four books had something to offer – although some more than others. Below I have attempted to give a short review of each, ending with some recommendations in case you are considering choosing a book on talent to read, and a brief summary.

My top choice is easily the now-classic work by Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen entitled *Talented Teenagers: the Roots of Success & Failure* (1997). I will confess to being quite a fan of Csikszentmihalyi's work already before reading this book, however: both *Flow* (1990) and *Creativity* (1996) were inspirational and valuable sources of information for my work as well as life. And *Talented Teenagers* was no different: a cross between research findings, ideas, and wide-ranging implications written in a page-turning style worthy of a novel. Somewhat unusually, the book is a report on a vast longitudinal study and so, in ways, it is simply a longer version of an academic paper. The work was a multi-method study of over 200 talented teenagers as well as their parents and schools, with the ultimate aim of better understanding why some go on to develop their talents during the teenage years while others drop out.

Significantly, "talent" covered a range of areas including sports, arts, and educational (e.g. talent for science subjects) and findings relating to the similarities and differences between the areas were very interesting. For instance, those talented in the arts enjoyed being involved in their talent domain slightly more than those talented in the sciences, but the latter were more likely to say their domain felt useful to them and their future. Although reporting on a single study may sound tedious, it is not so: the reader is guided between chapters and so those less keen on methodological detail can easily skip those in favour of chapters describing results relating to, for example, what talented teenagers are like, how they live, how families and schools influence talent development, and commitment to talent over time. This openness about methods, statistics and specific results, common to research papers but not to books, invites the reader to better understand how conclusions are arrived at, and allows them to be criticised or put in context.

Talented Teenagers provides intriguing links between talent, flow, and creativity, as might be expected given Csikszentmihalyi's background. In doing so, it also emphasises the crucial role of motivation in talent development and how the crucial intrinsic motivation (or *love*) can be nurtured or hindered. It also strongly posits that high achievers are not necessarily born any different to their less high-achieving peers, but work harder as a result of enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. In a discussion on teaching, for example, it is stated:

?we assume that if the material is well organized and logically presented, students will learn it. Nothing is farther from the fact. Students will learn only if they are motivated. (p. 195).

Importantly, however, *Talented Teenagers* does not take a complete "nurture" view, suggesting that "all you need is love", but recognises that certain innate factors are at least likely to make the hard work easier for some than for others. By the

same token, it recognises that although there are numerous inspiring stories of how some geniuses overcame almost unimaginable hardships to go on and develop their talents, having a secure background where money, time and support are forthcoming will make talent development far more likely. This is also part of what makes the book stand out from the others I read: the large emphasis placed on talent as being inherently linked to support from significant others such as parents and teachers.

Some of the most intriguing findings are relating to optimum family context and structure. For example, did you know that a *complex family structure* is perhaps most likely to support talent development – that is, a family that is integrated (cohesive, supportive, stable) and differentiated (individualist, challenging, change-oriented) at different times? Similar, but also many other, findings relating to

optimal teaching and coaching environments are also presented. As such, the book is both research-based and realistic. This realism also stretches to the notion of talent itself, and its potential value:

?talent is not a natural category. Talent is a social construction: it is a label of approval we place on traits that have a positive value in the particular context in which we live. (p. 22).

It is this mix of evidence-based information linked to common sense and the tendency not to over-state the importance of a single set of findings that make *Talented Teenagers* very appealing – in fact, I find it more widely applicable than the authors themselves suggest, with clear links to teaching, coaching, parenting, expertise development, creativity, and more. And so, risking sounding like an advertisement, my conclusion is – buy this book. I challenge you not to find it relevant to your work and/or life!

Sports Talent: How to Identify and Develop Outstanding Athletes by Jim Brown (2001) promises to reveal the characteristics most important to athletic success and how they each contribute within different sport activities. He splits these characteristics into three broad categories: physical, mental and emotional, and “intangible”. As one might expect even from the cover of this large-font, easy-to-read style of book, it promises a great deal. For instance, the back cover informs us that we will be told what to expect in the talent development process, how to overcome obstacles, and much more. And as is also perhaps typical of books of this type, it only really scratches the surface of the phenomenon of interest and sometimes makes rather sweeping statements. It also includes somewhat simplistic tests and suggestions for numbers and percentiles that girls and boys of certain ages may be expected to score above in order to be considered “talented” in various sports. For me, this feels rather too black-and-white and I would be unsure as to whether recommendations relating to wrestlers and gymnasts in the USA would apply to wrestlers and gymnasts in different countries in different years – let alone to other sports that are not mentioned in the book.

But to its credit, the book does do a good job of broadening the everyday view of sporting talent beyond physical characteristics such as speed and strength into mental/psychological and emotional characteristics such as passion and mental toughness, and “intangible” characteristics such as coachability and having a good influence on one’s teammates. It also repeatedly emphasises that while the book is concerned with talent identification and development, it is crucial to steer clear of pushing children and adolescents into activities simply based on some physical quality or precocious development. It similarly warns against children specialising early in a single sport. Instead, it emphasises choice, fun and diversity, and warns strongly against parental over-involvement. It further recognises that there is no single factor that makes any athlete “talented”; instead, talent is described as a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be measured with any certainty, that is amenable to change as a result of normal development as well as training regimes, and that shortcomings in some areas (e.g. physical strength or stature) can be overcome by strengths in others (e.g. determination and perseverance).

Peppered with quotes and anecdotes from American sporting greats, *Sports Talent* has an upbeat, pep-talk type of style that may be appealing to those wanting an accessible introduction to a topic. It also references relevant literature and cites recognised authors and experts, so it is by no means an unsupported view that is being put forward. And while the range of sports is US-centric, there is quite a wide range that each gets a specific chapter including baseball, basketball, American football, golf, gymnastics, hockey, soccer (that’s football to us Europeans!), softball, swimming, tennis, track & field and cross-country, volleyball, and wrestling. Therefore, the book may well be of interest to coaches and coach education. At the same time though, any potential reader should be aware that it is very American in its style, language, and examples; as such, there may well be parts that do not apply in other countries (e.g. the sport systems inside and outside universities and colleges, talent scouting).

I am also slightly unsure of the category labelled “intangible” characteristics; this is perhaps rather academic, but I would have preferred a discussion of *why* and *how* athletes develop characteristics such as coachability and positive influence on teammates rather than a statement that such characteristics cannot be taught; in fact, I would dispute it because several of these very same, or closely linked, characteristics are psychological in nature (i.e. not “intangible”!) and most likely affected

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by one's training environment. For instance, it seems logical that when the motivational climate in training is more task-oriented (e.g. emphasising cooperation and self-improvement), athletes would have a more positive impact on their teammates than when the climate is ego-oriented (e.g. emphasising rivalry and outdoing others). But perhaps this little irritation is merely a note-to-self that sport psychology has not yet produced enough research evidence into these clearly important phenomena, and that there is much research yet to be done before we know better what their role in talent development really is.

Altogether, *Sports Talent* is a nice introduction to the multifaceted phenomenon that is sports talent, and I would recommend it to those wanting an overview of what talent identification as well as development may entail. And I might well recommend it in case I meet someone who appears to over-value physical characteristics as the sole indicators of talent, or who might be pushing athletes into specialising too soon because it does a great job of promoting healthy development and rounded individuals.

” This type of books takes one concept and runs with it, applying it to everything and nothing and tries to turn a complexity into one simple, streamlined message.

If easy-read *Sports Talent* was sometimes a little simplistic, the pop-psychology / pop-business book *Talent is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else* by Geoff Colvin (2008) is even more so. I should know better than to shop for books in the self-help book sections of train station shops, but I couldn't quite help myself as the title was so very closely aligned to the other three titles I was reviewing. The essence of *Talent is Overrated* is centred on a few key pieces of information about deliberate practice. That is, while we tend to believe that talent is due to either innate differences or hard work, it is really down to highly goal-driven, focused high-quality work for 10 000 hours or so, underpinned by intrinsic interest and passion. This deliberate practice is qualitatively different from much of the more mindless repetitions and one-sided tasks that many of us loosely call training.

There is research underpinning the position taken in the book, and it is really very interesting. For instance, *Talent is Overrated* treats us to descriptions of the intense training regimes of Tiger Woods in golf and the Polgar sisters in chess – fascinating reading about parents giving up their jobs to coach their talents-to-be from the earliest years, how these parents enabled vast amounts of deliberate practice, and the pros and cons of such extreme measures. One of the most interesting studies referenced is the work of Sloboda and colleagues[1], describing how differences in musical ability between groups of young people was best predicted by hours of practice, not “set” factors such as starting age. Importantly, those reaching the highest ability levels had also not reached those high ability levels with less practice than their less-able peers: instead, the average number of hours spent to reach a given grade level was equal between groups.

Overall I would agree with Colvin that (innate) talent is sometimes overrated in our society, and that excusing oneself (or others) from trying something by saying “*I'm just not good at it*”, is somewhat sad – how can you ever know how talented you are if you have not put in as much high quality practice as the person you call “talented”? It is not as if talent is easily measured, or as if talented individuals have never had to work hard or overcome obstacles. But despite these agreements, *Talent is Overrated* is just a bit too simple to be true: as is often the case with mass-market books of this type, it takes one concept and runs with it, applying it to everything and nothing and tries to turn a complexity into one simple, streamlined message.

Somewhat surprisingly, the reasons why the book is simplistic may be found in the book edited by the man whose research forms the springboard for Colvin's ideas. This is *The Road to Excellence: The Acquisition of Expert Performance in the Arts and Sciences, Sports and Games*, by K. Anders Ericsson (1996). Intriguingly, however, it is not because Colvin somehow mis-cites Ericsson; the writings by the latter are very much the foundation of the practice-based view on expertise that it is deliberate practice that creates expert performance, not some innate talent. Many other chapters in this anthology are aligned with this view, and persuasive research findings are presented. The volume is a collection of 15 chapters written by contributors to a 1995 conference on expertise, and the contributions are therefore from different people – a distinct contrast to the other three books reviewed here. The domains of expertise tackled are also vastly different – ranging from sport and music to reading, visual arts, medical work, creativity, reading, and more.

The Road to Excellence also includes a chapter by Sloboda – that is, the same music researcher who was cited in *Talent is Overrated*. This is a fascinating account of how music, both technical and expressive aspects, may be studied rigorously and scientifically. It is also a more in-depth account of the music ability work mentioned above. It is, however, also very dense and technical. It is Ellen Winner's chapter on drawing expertise that, for me, presents one of the clearest arguments as to why talent can, in part, be inherited and not simply acquired by anyone motivated enough. She clarifies that although researchers such as Ericsson have clearly established that high levels of deliberate practice is a necessary condition for talent development, this does not in any way rule out the possibility that innate factors contribute to this process:

?No one disputes the biological basis of retardation (with the exception of that due to extremely impoverished environments); and yet some do assert that high ability, the flip side of retardation, is entirely due to hard work. But

Indeed, so much in life and nature is distributed on a normal bell curve. Why not rates of learning? She goes on to describe how the intense drive and passion to master something is part of talent rather than simply a cause or result of it; for example, she describes how children who are exceptionally talented in drawing can almost not be stopped from practicing and need to be encouraged to even eat or sleep. While such extreme cases may be rare, the notion that motivation is part of talent is not dissimilar to the findings of Csikszentmihalyi mentioned above, further reinforcing the idea that talent is multifaceted and that psychological aspects, and perhaps especially motivation, is part and parcel of that. Another fascinating chapter in *The Road to Excellence* is that by Simonton on creative expertise. Speaking of how genetics and environment can each shape each other, he summarises the complexity of creative talent as follows (but I think it applies equally to other domains):

the development of creative potential becomes an extremely convoluted phenomenon. It is largely for this reason that the identification and encouragement of creative talent is so difficult. Successful prediction alone would require a regression equation containing hundreds of variables with hundreds more product terms to capture all the curvilinear and interaction effects. (p. 246).

The existence of contradictory views within a single volume reveals why books such as *The Road to Excellence* are far preferable to the more mass-market volumes such as *Talent is Overrated* or even *Sports Talent* to anyone wishing more than a casual look at the topic; they are open to complexity and to contradiction. The volume clearly demonstrates that even seemingly conflicting findings can *all* be right, simply because there are so very many ways to research talent and expertise, so many areas, so many approaches to take, and because no single study, or even set of studies, can ever encompass all variables for all domains at the same time. And so, while most of us would perhaps prefer clear and consistent messages from what we read, the reality of talent, just like so many other things in life, is that it is just not that simple.

” If you are interested in talent in any way at all (and if you are still reading this, I will assume you are!), buy *Talented Teenagers: the Roots of Success & Failure*. You won't be disappointed!

On the whole, *The Road to Excellence* has many chapters that may not be of immediate relevance to sport or exercise researchers or practitioners: in fact, I found that several chapters were beyond me. That said, even clearly non-sport, non-art chapters such as Wagner and Stanovich's *Expertise in Reading* offered me something new – in this case, ideas of how growth over time may be analysed, clearly relevant to talent research also in other domains, including sport. Therefore, even reading chapters that were not immediately appealing was rewarding. The best use of *The Road to Excellence*, however, is probably as an academic resource to dip into here and there – for anyone doing research into talent or expertise, it is certainly a milestone and a classic.

Recommendations

1. If you want an easy beach-read with intriguing examples of how people like Tiger Woods and Mozart became great, plus some good examples of how organisations and teams can support talent development, go for *Talent is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else*. But don't assume that talent is quite as simple as it sometimes appears in these pages!
2. If you want a clear, easy-read introduction to the different aspects of talent in sports and how they may be nurtured, do not mind a somewhat US-centric style, or want to warn someone against putting their children into elite training too early, go for *Sports Talent: How to Identify and Develop Outstanding Athletes*.
3. If you want an in-depth academic discourse on how talent and expertise are developed in a large variety of domains, or want a valuable resource to obtain good arguments for both nature and nurture accounts for talent as well as examples of research methodologies in highly varied areas, go for *The Road to Excellence: The Acquisition of Expert Performance in the Arts and Sciences, Sports and Games*.
4. If you are interested in talent in any way at all (and if you are still reading this, I will assume you are!), buy *Talented Teenagers: the Roots of Success & Failure*. You won't be disappointed!

Summary

As is often the case when one starts to scratch the surface of something new, more things appear than was first imagined, and it often feels like more questions than answers emerge. What is clear is that talent is no easy concept to identify, nurture or even describe. The best books, therefore, open eyes to this multifariousness and encourage us to expect complexity rather than look for easy answers or one-dimensional tests – talent simply isn't that simple. I also discovered

that my list of “must reads” kept growing as I went on, and I do feel this review would have benefitted greatly from inclusion of such classic works as *Developing Talent in Young People* by Bloom (1985). It is also my suspicion that there are findings relating to genetics that were not cited in these more psychology-based books, simply because it is difficult to be a researcher (or even a critical reader) in several disparate areas at once. Third, I am aware that this is a rather unusual review, given that the books are, in most cases, not that new. But the topic is a seemingly timeless source of fascination: during the months I was working my way through the pages of the four books (often on the way to and from work) adverts for Malcolm Gladwell’s new book *Outliers* started appearing around me in the London underground: huge posters saying *It doesn't start with talent, it starts with love*. And so the debate goes on?

[1] Sloboda, J. A., Davidson, J. W., Howe, M. J. A., & Moore, D. G. (1996). The role of practice in the development of performing musicians. *British Journal of Psychology*, 87, 287-309.

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Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Kevin Rathunde & Samuel Whalen

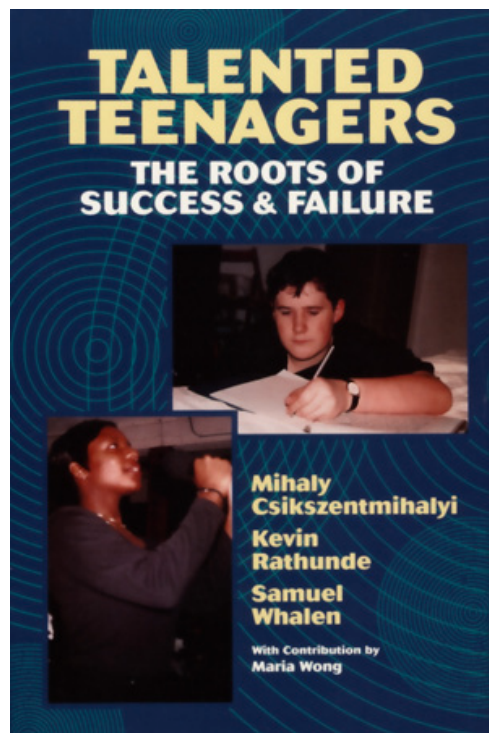
Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure

307 sidor, hft.

Cambridge, Cambs: Cambridge University Press 1997

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Jim Brown

Sports Talent: How to Identify and Develop Outstanding Athletes

312 sidor, hft., ill.

Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics 2001

ISBN 978-0-7360-3390-9

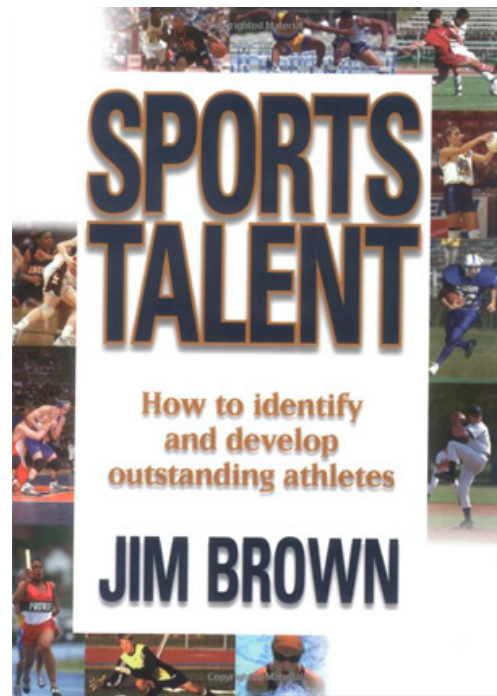
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Geoff Colvin

Talent is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else

228 sidor, hft.

London & Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing

2008

ISBN 978-1-85788-519-4

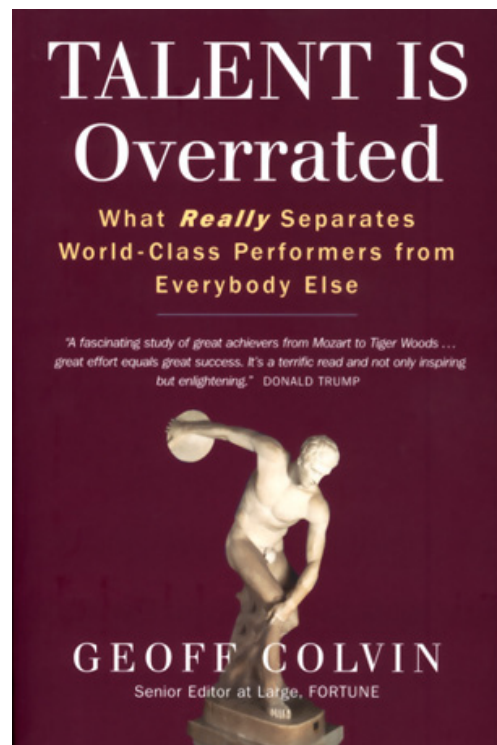
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K. Anders Ericsson (red)

The Road to Excellence: The Acquisition of Expert Performance in the Arts and Sciences, Sports and Games

369 sidor, hft.

London: Psychology Press (Laurence Erlbaum Associates) 1996

ISBN 978-0-8058-2232-8

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