

INTRODUCTION

THE POWER OF PRACTICE

*Everybody has the will to win;
few people have the will to prepare to win.*

—BOBBY KNIGHT

It's a funny thing. The more I practice the luckier I get.

—ARNOLD PALMER

John Wooden is a legend. The coach of UCLA's basketball team for 27 years, he was anointed "Greatest Coach of the 20th Century" by ESPN and the greatest coach ever—in any sport—by the *Sporting News*. Wooden led his teams to ten national championships in 12 years, won 88 consecutive games, and achieved the highest winning percentage (.813) of any coach in NCAA basketball history—all while building an enduring reputation for developing the character of his players at least as much as their skill. It's not surprising that in the decades since Wooden retired, his influence has spread far beyond the basketball court. Books by and about Wooden apply his insights to life, learning, and business as much as to basketball.

Regardless of any interest in sports, people study Wooden's methods for the alchemy that turns struggle into triumph. And yet the great majority of students of his work fail to replicate

Wooden-like results. Why? Our answer, based on what we—Doug, Erica, and Katie—discovered in our efforts to help promising teachers become great teachers, is that most people fail to realize the power of the one thing that is arguably the secret of Wooden's success: old-fashioned practice, efficiently run, well-planned, and intentionally executed.

If you were to ask Wooden what made his teams so successful, he would likely describe a series of unacknowledged moments in otherwise empty gymnasiums: his players practicing shooting without a basketball, say. Or perhaps he'd describe his evenings in his office scripting the next day's practice, noting where the racks of basketballs should be placed so time was never wasted looking for a ball. John Wooden doted on practice to a degree that was legendary. He began—surely to much eye rolling—by practicing things that every other coach would have considered unworthy, if they'd have considered them at all: how to put on socks and sneakers, for example.¹ He timed his practices to the minute, husbanding every second to ensure its precise and careful allocation. He kept a record of every practice on note cards, which he filed away for future reference: what worked; what didn't; how to do it better next time. Unlike many coaches, he focused not on scrimmaging—playing in a way that *replicated* the game—but on drilling, that is playing in ways that intentionally *distorted* the game to emphasize and isolate specific concepts and skills. He followed a logical progression, often starting his instruction on topics like shooting by having players work without the ball and building to increasingly challenging applications. He repeated drills until his players achieved mastery and then automaticity, even if it meant not drilling on more sophisticated topics. At the point where other coaches might decide their teams had learned a skill, Wooden's teams were just beginning their work. And he always insisted that his players practiced doing it—whatever “it” was—right.

Though we remember him for the championships, what ultimately made Wooden great was practice. Every iteration of teaching

and explaining and executing again and again was a tiny bit better than anyone else's. The culture in which those drills took place—what players were thinking as they stood in lines—was a little bit more humble, selfless, relentless. The compounded effect of these tiny differences was a dynasty.

Author and sportswriter Daniel Coyle's book *The Talent Code* is just one of several recent efforts to understand the tradition of intentional practice that Wooden helped establish. In the book, Coyle describes how the compounded effect of better practice accounts for the rise of seemingly inexplicable “hot spots” of talent around the globe. What seems like talent, it turns out, is often better practice habits in disguise. How could it be, for example, that a single tennis club in a freezing climate—a club Coyle describes as “rundown” and with just one indoor court—has, since its founding, produced more top-20 women players than all of the tennis clubs in the United States put together?

The answer is Larisa Preobrazhenskaya, the gray-haired, track-suit-wearing majordomo whose players follow the adage that practice makes permanent—that if practice drives actions into muscle memory, it's better to do it slow and right than fast and not quite right. Like John Wooden, she practices fewer things better, and with diligence. She is unapologetic about asking her athletes to imitate others, an approach that many coaches too often dismiss as demeaning. Via these simple obsessions, Coyle tells us, Preobrazhenskaya has almost single-handedly changed Russia's perception of itself. The initial success of her players caused an explosion of interest in tennis in Russia that fed the practice mill with aspiring players and produced success on such a massive scale that it appeared to be a statistical impossibility. Today Russia sees itself as a tennis nation made of players who believe they can do just about anything.

Again and again Coyle shows that the aggregation of seemingly trivial improvements in practice can create otherwise inexplicable densities of talent sufficient to change a society and its conception

of what is possible. Brazil's passion for soccer makes it an international power, but its passion for *futsal*, a soccer derivative featuring small-sided games in an enclosed space using a less elastic ball, yields as many as six times the touches per hour for a developing Brazilian player, Coyle points out, than for a similar player in some other nation. The game's space limitations reward skills learned to speedy automaticity. "Commentators love to talk about how 'creative' Brazilian players are—but that's not quite right. The truth is, they've been practicing that creativity for their entire lives," writes Coyle. The humble details of their practice separate Brazil from every other soccer-obsessed nation on Earth.

For its part, the United States remains a competition-loving culture. We love the heroic upset, the last hurrah of the aging veteran, the final ticking seconds as the game comes down to the wire. We watch games and follow teams and players, sometimes to the point of obsession (especially if our kids are playing), but if we really wanted to see greatness—to cheer for it and understand what made it happen—we'd spend our time watching practices instead. We would pay a lot more attention to how drills were designed, to a culture of humility and perseverance among the players, to whether there was enough practice, or indeed—as we will soon discover—whether there was any practicing at all.

Imagine for a moment what it would be like if we could manufacture "hot spots" like the one Coyle describes among Russian tennis players. Imagine if we could cause a spike in performance sufficient to change a society's perception of what it is possible to achieve by and for its people. Imagine if we could apply it not just to our own soccer and tennis programs but also to things far more important than sports: to running better hospitals and schools, to a thousand endeavors across the economy where entrepreneurs and managers create value for the people who rely on and benefit from their products and services.

This book is not really about sports, then, though we are confident that you will be able to apply its conclusions in that

setting if *you* are all about basketball or soccer or skiing. Our purpose in writing this book is to engage the dream of "better," both in fields where participants know they should practice, but could do it more effectively, and also in endeavors where most people do not yet recognize the transformative power of practice. Deliberately engineered and designed, practice can revolutionize our most important endeavors; in that, we speak from at least a bit of experience.



Our own journey to understanding the power of practice began with an ad hoc study of great teachers in our nation's high-poverty public schools: work outlined in Doug's book *Teach Like a Champion*. This study revealed that positive outliers—teachers who were anomalously and sometimes breathtakingly successful in the face of adversity—were a lot like John Wooden. They were the most likely to focus on small and seemingly mundane aspects of their daily work.

Great teachers obsessed on things like how efficiently they used time in the classroom. They fought a running battle for seconds and minutes by paying careful attention to how (and how quickly) their students lined up or passed out papers. They perseverated on the words they used to explain a concept. This struck us as ironic. The teachers whose students had best mastered the higher order, the abstract, and the rigorous—a deep reading of symbolism in *Lord of the Flies*, or reliably solving equations with two unknowns—were those teachers most likely to obsess on things that others thought unworthy of attention. There was more to it than that, obviously. Great teachers did more than obsess on the efficiency of their classroom—their questions were artful; their assignments, demanding—but there was a clear tendency among positive outliers to see the power of the humdrum, the everyday. Think here of John Wooden on the first day of practice, teaching