

The Mental Game

Focus and Deliberate Practice

Here are some interesting facts. Larry Bird, as a pro, would stay after practice and shoot 100 foul shots in a row without missing. Jerry West, learned how to dribble a basketball by sitting in a chair and dribbling around the legs. Phil Michelson putts 100 shots prior to each match. Shane Van Boening says he spends 2 hrs a day just working on his break. Ewa Laurence has said she has spent as much as 12 hrs a day practicing pool. Tiger Woods has a swing coach who is constantly helping Tiger improve his swing. What made these players great wasn't the fact that they practiced a lot. It was the fact that they selected something that they knew was important and perfected it and moved on to something else. Larry knew that the free throw was essentially "free" points. If he could perfect that one shot he could almost guarantee an extra 10 points a game. The side benefit was that by practicing the mechanics of that one shot, he also became one of the best three point shooters in the game. Shane says that the break is the most important shot of the game of pool, and he has the best break in the pros. He's been the number one player in pool for almost ten years. (If you need confirmation of the importance of the break shot there is a match on you tube where he runs 8 racks of 8 ball in a row against Earl Strickland.)

These players didn't just practice the game. They practiced things that made their game great. This is called deliberate practice. Picking a weakness and turning it into a strength. Then move to another weakness. It's an endless circle because perfection is unobtainable but the more we strive to achieve it, the better player we become. It doesn't matter if you are an athlete, a CEO, an actor, or a musician. It's the same formula. Choose your worst weakness. Find out how to fix it, and make it your strength. Move on. Do it again. Sounds easy, doesn't it? Well, in actuality, there is nothing hard or mysterious about that. Where most people fall short is that sometimes you have to relearn what you think you know. Some people can't bear to take a step backward to move two steps forward. Some don't want to sacrifice the time to get those fundamentals "automatic." Saying, "Practice is boring." Then they get into a competition and resort to their old self and claim that those drills are flawed and don't work for them. Here's one that I like, "I was watching (enter name here) and this is the way he does it, and they're pretty good. If it's good enough for them it should be good enough for me." Let me explain the problem of that logic before we go any further. There are a lot of very good players out there that don't do things "textbook". However, what allows them to excel is that in those long hours of playing with bad fundamentals they have learned to compensate very well, and play at the highest levels. Think of it this way. They have built an inverted pyramid, perfectly balanced on the point. They are constantly trying to keep the perfect balance by shifting around pyramid. It's hard to do and exhausting. I applaud their diligence and determination but really, how long can they keep it up. Usually, these players peak and then disappear. Now a player with good fundamentals builds his pyramid from the base up. It's solid, lasts a lifetime and doesn't need a lot of work to keep it looking sharp.

So how do I develop this deliberate practice? How do I identify what to work on first? Easiest, fastest way to improve at anything is to get a coach, a mentor, or a teacher. Someone who can objectively look

at your game, critique it, and give you the tools to improve. A second choice, you can use video, books, or the talk to the local above average player, and they all will help, but they won't necessarily give you the objectivity to break the plateau you will eventually run into. First step, you need rock solid fundamentals. Good stance, grip, and stroke. Tor Lowry, when he is retraining people who have hit that plateau, goes right back to the basics and has his people hit a thousand balls straight into a pocket with no English. Then he moves to a different spot and does it again. He gets results but I think there is a better way. The University of Florida did a study and found that if you did something repeatedly, like a pool stroke, more than ten times in a row, you would get bored and lose focus. If you are just going through the motions you may be reinforcing bad habits as well as good. If you have a coach there to "refocus" your attention then yes, you can go beyond that ten, but most of us don't have the time or money to have a coach watch 1000 shots. So what we want to do is choose drills that we can do that reinforce good fundamentals. Do ten of each of these and move onto something else. These drills should be done twice a day and should take about 30 minutes to complete each time. Once our fundamentals are solid we move to ball control drills. Same philosophy, and we still do the fundamental drills. This, by itself, will improve your game. It may take a couple of months to incorporate these new techniques but your game will improve. Then you can look at the other weaknesses. Maybe it's table shots, or rail shots. Maybe it's the break. In each case, we break down that shot into the simplest form and build up from there. Dedicated practice! It's not easy, not always fun, but it is essential if you want to excel.

Now a word about focus. It is so easy in today's world to be distracted and lose focus. When you start down the path of dedicated practice you need to analyze every shot until it becomes automatic. When you shoot you should be visualizing hitting the ball and the ball going into the pocket. We need to be able to block out all the unnecessary noise that can be distraction. If we let any of this minutia in we risk losing the visualization, and that is the key. In that same Florida study they found visualization was the key to repeatedly being able to make a shot. Your brain sees what it needs to do and then does it. If you are shooting a basketball you see the ball leave your hand and fall into the basket. In golf you see the club go through the ball and the ball sail onto the green. In pool, you see the cue ball hit the object ball and the object ball going into the pocket. Any distraction, can interrupt that visualization. That is part of the reason we do a pre shot routine. To keep us focused.

Let me end this article with a final thought. Positive thinking. Our brain can be our own worst enemy. We have to believe we are going to make every shot. Here's a quote, "Champions know they can make a shot. Competitors know there is possibility they may miss." Don't shoot yourself in the foot with negative thoughts. Think like a champion.