Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Bounce

How Champions are Made

Written by Matthew Syed

Published by Fourth Estate

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

BOUNCE

How Champions Are Made

MATTHEW SYED

FOURTH ESTATE • *London*

First published in Great Britain in 2010
Fourth Estate
A Division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
London W6 8JB
www.4thestate.co.uk

Copyright © Matthew Syed 2010

1

The right of Matthew Syed to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-00-735052-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system, in any form or by any
means, without permission in writing from Fourth Estate.

PICTURE CREDITS
Image 1: photo courtesy of Richard Gregory
Image 2: photo courtesy of John Cassidy
Image 4: map courtesy of Jon Entine

Typeset in Minion and Frutiger

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



FSC is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the
responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC
label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come
from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and
ecological needs of present and future generations.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

For Dilys

Contents

Part I: The Talent Myth

1 The Hidden Logic of Success 3
2 Miraculous Children? 51
3 The Path to Excellence 71
4 Mysterious Sparks and Life-Changing Mindsets 105

Part II: Paradoxes of the Mind

5 The Placebo Effect 139
6 The Curse of Choking and How to Avoid It 168
7 Baseball Rituals, Pigeons, and Why Great Sportsmen Feel Miserable after Winning 187

Part III: Deep Reflections

8 Optical Illusions and X-ray Vision 203
9 Drugs in Sport, Schwarzenegger Mice, and the Future of Mankind 218
10 Are Blacks Superior Runners? 238

Acknowledgements 269
Notes 271
Index 285

PART I

The Talent Myth

1
The Hidden Logic of Success

The Autobiographical Bias

In January 1995, I became the British number-one table tennis player for the very first time which, I am sure you will agree, is a heck of an achievement. At twenty-four years of age, I suddenly found myself on the receiving end of regular invitations to speak to school audiences about my rise to international glory, and would often take my gold medals along to dazzle the youngsters.

Table tennis is a pretty big sport in the UK, with 2.4 million participants, 30,000 paid-up members of the governing body, thousands of teams, and serious riches for those who excel. But what made me special? What had marked me out for sporting greatness? I came up with a number of attributes: speed, guile, gutsiness, mental strength, adaptability, agility, and reflexes.

Sometimes I would marvel at the fact that I had these skills in such abundance that they were capable of elevating me – little me! – beyond hundreds of thousands of others aspiring to that precious top spot. And all this was doubly amazing, considering I had been born into a family in an ordinary suburb of an ordinary town in south-east England. There was no silver spoon. No advantages. No nepotism. Mine was a triumph of

individuality; a personal odyssey of success, a triumph against the odds.

This, of course, is the way that many who have reached the top in sport, or indeed in any other field, choose to tell their stories. We live in a culture that encourages this kind of soaring individualism. Hollywood is full of such narratives, often sugar-coated in that well-known American Dream sentimentality. But while these stories are inspirational, rousing, and compulsively entertaining, are they true? Here is my story in table tennis, retold with the bits that I chose to ignore the first time around, as they diminished the romance and the individuality of my triumph.

1. Table

In 1978 my parents, for reasons they are still unable to explain (neither of them plays table tennis), decided to buy a table tennis table – a super deluxe 1000 with gold lettering, since you ask – and to put it in our large garage. I don't know the exact percentage, but you can imagine that there were not many youngsters of my age in my home town who possessed a full-size, tournament-specification table. Fewer still had a garage in which it could be housed full-time. This was my first bit of good fortune.

2. My Brother

My second piece of good fortune was having an older brother called Andrew who came to love table tennis as much as I. We would play for hours in the garage after school: duelling, battling, testing each other's reflexes, experimenting with new spins, investigating new paddles, inviting over friends who, although often more accomplished in other sports, were bemused to see just how far we had advanced in table tennis.

Without knowing it, we were blissfully accumulating thousands of hours of practice.

3. Peter Charters

Mr Charters was a teacher at the local primary school, a tall man with moustache, a twinkle in his eye, a disdain for conventional teaching methods, and a passion for sport that bordered on the fanatical. He was the coach of almost all the after-school sporting clubs, the manager of the school football team, the organizer of school sports day, custodian of the badminton equipment, and inventor of a game called 'Bucket Ball', a kind of improvised basketball.

But Charters cared about one thing above all: table tennis. He was the nation's top coach and a senior figure in the English Table Tennis Association. The other sports were just a front, an opportunity to scout sporting talent wherever it emerged so he could focus it – ruthlessly and exclusively – upon table tennis. No child who passed through Aldryngton School in Reading was not given a try-out by Charters. And such was his zeal, energy, and dedication to table tennis that anybody who showed potential was persuaded to take their skills forward at the local club, Omega.

Charters invited me and my brother Andy to join Omega in 1980, at the very moment we were beginning to outgrow the garage.

4. Omega

Omega was not a luxurious club – it was a one-table hut in a gravel enclosure a couple of miles from where we lived in suburban Reading: cold in winter, ferociously hot in summer, with plants growing through the roof and floor. But it had one

advantage that made it almost unique in the county: it was open twenty-four hours a day, for the exclusive use of its tiny group of members, each of whom had a set of keys.

My brother and I took full advantage, training after school, before school, at weekends, and during school holidays. We were also joined by other Aldryngton alumni who had been spotted and snapped up by Charters, so that by 1981 Omega was becoming something of a sensation. One street alone (Silverdale Road, on which the school was situated) contained an astonishing number of the nation's top players.

At number 119 were the Syeds. Andrew, my brother, went on to become one of the most successful junior players in the history of British table tennis, winning three national titles before retiring due to injury in 1986. He was later described by Charters as the best young player to emerge from England for a quarter of a century. Matthew (that's me) also lived at 119 and became a long-serving England senior number one, a three-time Commonwealth champion, and a two-time Olympian.

At number 274, just opposite Aldryngton, lived Karen Witt. She was one of the most brilliant female players of her generation. She won countless junior titles, the national senior title, the hugely prestigious Commonwealth championship, and dozens of other competitions during a sparkling career. When she retired with back trouble at the age of twenty-five, she had changed the face of English women's table tennis.

At number 149, equidistant between the Syeds and the Witts, lived Andy Wellman. He was a powerful player who would go on to win a series of titles, mainly in doubles, and was widely feared, particularly after defeating one of the top English players in the prestigious Top 12 event.

At the bottom of Silverdale Road was Paul Trott, another leading junior, and Keith Hodder, an outstanding county player.

Around the corner were Jimmy Stokes (England junior champion), Paul Savins (junior international), Alison Gordon (four times English senior champion), Paul Andrews (top national player), and Sue Collier (England schools champion). I could go on.

For a period in the 1980s, this one street, and the surrounding vicinity, produced more outstanding table tennis players than the rest of the nation combined. One road among tens of thousands of roads; one tiny cohort of schoolkids against millions up and down the country. Silverdale Road was the wellspring of English table tennis: a Ping-Pong mecca that seemed to defy explanation or belief.

Had some genetic mutation spread throughout the local vicinity without touching the surrounding roads or villages? Of course not: the success of Silverdale Road was about the coming together of factors of a beguilingly similar kind to those that have, from time to time, elevated other tiny areas on our planet into the sporting ascendancy (Spartak, an impoverished tennis club in Moscow, for example, created more top-twenty women players between 2005 and 2007 than the whole of the United States).

In particular, all of the sporting talent was focused ruthlessly on table tennis, and all of the aspiring players were nurtured by an outstanding coach. And as for me, with a table in the garage and a brother as passionate about Ping-Pong as myself, I had a head start before I even got to Aldryngton.

The Myth of Meritocracy

My parents – bless them – continue to describe my success in table tennis as an inspirational triumph against the odds. That

is kind indeed, and I thank them for it. When I showed them a draft of this chapter, they disputed its entire thesis. Yes, but what about Michael O'Driscoll (a rival from Yorkshire)? He had all your advantages, but he didn't make it. What about Bradley Billington (another rival from Derbyshire)? He had parents who were international table tennis players, but he did not become England's number one.

This is merely a slightly different twist on what I call the autobiographical bias. My point is not that I was a bad table tennis player; rather, it is that I had powerful advantages not available to hundreds of thousands of other youngsters. I was, in effect, the best of a very small bunch. Or, to put it another way, I was the best of a very big bunch, only a tiny fraction of whom had my opportunities.

What is certain is that if a big enough group of youngsters had been given a table at eight, had a brilliant older brother to practise with, had been trained by one of the top coaches in the country, had joined the only twenty-four-hour club in the county, and had practised for thousands of hours by their early teens, I would not have been number one in England. I might not have even been number one thousand and one in England. Any other conclusion is a crime against statistics (it is of course *possible* that I would have been number one, but the possibility is strictly theoretical).

We like to think that sport is a meritocracy – where achievement is driven by ability and hard work – but it is nothing of the sort. Think of the thousands of potential table tennis champions not fortunate enough to live in Silverdale Road, with its peculiar set of advantages. Think of the thousands of potential Wimbledon champions who have never been fortunate enough to own a tennis racket or receive specialized coaching. Think of the millions of potential Major-winning

golfers who have never had access to a golf club.

Practically every man or woman who triumphs against the odds is, on closer inspection, a beneficiary of unusual circumstances. The delusion lies in focusing on the individuality of their triumph without perceiving – or bothering to look for – the powerful opportunities stacked in their favour.

This is one of the central points made by Malcolm Gladwell in his marvellous book *Outliers*. Gladwell shows how the success of Bill Gates, the Beatles, and other outstanding performers is not so much to do with 'what they are like' but rather 'where they come from'. 'The people who stand before kings may look like they did it all by themselves,' Gladwell writes. 'But in fact they are invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others cannot.'

Whenever I am inclined to think I am unique and special, I remind myself that had I lived one door further down the road, I would have been in a different school catchment area, which would have meant that I would not have attended Aldryngton, would never have met Peter Charters, and would never have joined Omega. It is often said that in elite sport the margins of victory and defeat are measured in milliseconds: the reality is that they are measured in variables that are far more elusive.

But it is worth pausing here for a moment to consider an objection. You may agree with the thrust of the argument that opportunity is *necessary* for success, but is it *sufficient*? What about the natural gifts that mark out the very best from the rest? Are these skills not necessary to get to a Wimbledon final or the top of an Olympic podium? Are they not vital to becoming a chess grandmaster or the CEO of a multinational? Is it not delusional to suppose that you (or your children) can achieve

great success without also possessing rare talent?

This has been the abiding presumption of modern society ever since Francis Galton, an English Victorian polymath, published his book *Hereditary Genius*. In the book, Galton wields the insights of his half-cousin Charles Darwin to come up with a theory of human achievement that remains in the ascendancy to this day.

'I propose to show', Galton wrote, 'that a man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world . . . I have no patience with the hypothesis . . . that babies are born pretty much alike and the sole agencies in creating differences . . . are steady application and moral effort.'

The idea that natural talent determines success and failure is, today, so powerful that it is accepted without demur. It *seems* indisputable. When we watch Roger Federer caressing a cross-court forehand winner or a chess grandmaster playing twenty games simultaneously while blindfolded or Tiger Woods launching a 350-yard fade, we are irresistibly drawn to the conclusion that they possess special gifts not shared by the rest of us.

The skills are so qualitatively different, so detached from our own lives and experience, that the very idea that we could achieve similar results with the same opportunities seems nothing less than ridiculous.

The metaphors we use to describe outstanding achievers encourage this way of thinking. Roger Federer, for example, has been said to have 'tennis encoded in his DNA'. Tiger Woods is said to have been 'born to play golf'. Top performers subscribe to this way of thinking, too. Diego Maradona once claimed he was born with 'football skill in my feet'.

But is talent what we think it is?

What Is Talent?

In 1991 Anders Ericsson, a psychologist at Florida State University, and two colleagues conducted the most extensive investigation ever undertaken into the causes of outstanding performance.

Their subjects – violinists at the renowned Music Academy of West Berlin in Germany – were divided into three groups. The first group comprised the outstanding students: the boys and girls expected to become international soloists, the pinnacle of musical performance. These were the kids who would normally be described as supertalented, the youngsters supposedly lucky enough to have been born with special musical genes.

The second group of students were extremely good, but not as accomplished as the top performers. These were expected to end up playing in the world's top orchestras, but not as star soloists. In the final group were the least able students: teenagers studying to become music teachers, a course with far less stringent admissions standards.

The ability levels of the three groups were based on the assessment of the professors and corroborated by objective measures such as success in open competitions.

After a painstaking set of interviews, Ericsson found that the biographical histories of the three groups were remarkably similar and showed no systematic differences. The age when the students began practice was around eight years of age, which was the same time they began formal lessons. The average age when they first decided to become musicians was just before they turned fifteen. The average number of music teachers who had taught them was 4.1, and the average number of musical instruments that they had studied beyond the violin was 1.8.

But there was one difference between the groups that was both dramatic and unexpected; indeed, it was so stark that it almost jumped out at Ericsson and his colleagues – the number of hours devoted to serious practice.

By the age of twenty, the best violinists had practised an average of ten thousand hours – *more than two thousand hours more than the good violinists* and *more than six thousand hours more than the violinists hoping to become music teachers*. These differences are not just statistically significant; they are extraordinary. Top performers had devoted thousands of additional hours to the task of becoming master performers.

But that's not all. Ericsson also found that there were no exceptions to this pattern: nobody who had reached the elite group without copious practice, and nobody who had worked their socks off but failed to excel. Purposeful practice was the only factor distinguishing the best from the rest.

Ericsson and his colleagues were astounded by these findings, sensing that they heralded a paradigm shift in the way excellence is understood – that it is practice, not talent, that ultimately matters. 'We deny that these differences [in skill level] are immutable; that is, due to innate talent,' they wrote. 'Instead we argue that the differences between expert performers and normal adults reflect a life-long persistence of deliberate effort to improve performance.'

The aim of the first part of this book is to convince you that Ericsson is right; that talent is not what you think it is; that you can accomplish all manner of things that seem so far beyond your current capabilities as to occupy a different universe. But this will not be a wishy-washy exercise in the power of positive thinking. Rather, the arguments will be grounded in recent findings in cognitive neuroscience that attest to the way the body and mind can be transformed with specialized practice.