



Good, Better, Best

Continuous improvement takes not just practice, but deliberate practice, as well as mental management of your game.

BY JOHN D. SHIMA

Fred Bosshardt, my good friend and former teammate on the shooting team at Trinity University, often shares his San Antonio Spurs courtside tickets with me. While watching a game, and being in awe of how good NBA players are when they play their best, I was reminded of a quote by Tim Duncan, who was the first overall pick in the NBA draft in 1997. Tim was also named Rookie of the Year, and he played his entire 19-year career with the Spurs. Yet, Tim didn't see himself as a gifted athlete. He was just the kid who worked harder to get better according to his personal maxim, "Good, better, best. Never let it rest. Until your good is better, and your better is best."

Performance guru Anders Ericsson spent much of his career

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studying chess prodigies, violin virtuosos, exceptional athletes, and people with extraordinary memory. During the process, he discovered a powerful learning strategy used by these unique individuals to truly excel at a specific skill. Ericsson collaborated with Robert Pool in 2016 to report these findings in their book, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*. They explained that anyone could achieve their peak performance with a musical instrument, in a specific sport, or literally any activity if they consistently applied



▲ Studies show that you can achieve peak performance if you consistently apply the principles of purposeful and deliberate practice.

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The great Michael Jordan, and more recently James Harden and Stephen Curry, top the list of underrated high school and college basketball players who became gifted superstars in the NBA. Just as Ericsson's research revealed, their true gift was not innate talent but tenacious pursuit of a single goal. Jordan, Harden, Curry and others like them were committed to purposeful and deliberate practice that was fueled by a relentless drive to become the best basketball players they could possibly be.

My second book, *A Method for the Magic: What You Think Affects the Way You Shoot*, was published the same year Ericsson and Pool released *Peak*. Coincidentally, I also wrote about the importance of practicing on purpose and pursuing deliberate practice in the first chapter. These concepts are important because the ultimate goal of practice must be the development of good habits, so good things can happen automatically.

HABIT LOOP

Charles Duhigg introduced the concept of the "habit loop" in his highly acclaimed book, *The Power of*

Habit. The habit loop occurs when a cue tells the brain to go into automatic mode, which activates a specific physical, mental, or emotional routine. In his book, *Blink*, author Malcolm Gladwell described a similar process in which the conscious mind analyzes the situation and determines how to perform a specific task, methodically supervises the training of the process to perform the task efficiently, and then transfers the job to the unconscious mind to perform the task automatically in response to the cue.

I call these habit loops pre-planned moves that are controlled by muscle memory. Pre-planned moves that respond automatically to a specific cue are developed through specific types of practice.

PURPOSEFUL PRACTICE

According to several sports psychologists, purposeful practice is a technique that pushes individuals to

develop specific skills: by setting clearly defined goals, remaining focused on the mastery of tasks required to achieve the goals, by exceeding the limits of the comfort zone, and by seeking constant feedback to drive improvement.

It is not the time invested in practice; it is the intention to improve a skill that makes ordinary practice purposeful. Hence, practicing with a specific purpose is necessary to achieve mastery of any skill. Scott Yurgalevich divides purposeful practice into three specific activities: basic practice, skill-building practice, and score-based practice.

- **Basic Practice** – A shooter must master the mechanical elements of their specific sport. Various aids are used to reinforce proper mechanics by blocking out poor habits and embedding good habits. The intention of basic practice is to program muscle memory to repeat ideal pre-planned moves, which are attached to specific target presentations during training drills.

- **Skill-Building Practice** – The next phase involves consciously applying the good mechanical habits created during basic practice to training drills with targets. Every training drill should be dedicated to a specific aspect of a specific target presentation, such as incomers, outgoers, baseline or doubles.

- **Score-Based Practice** – The final phase of this method is to perform your pre-planned moves automatically. Then you reinforce automaticity by simulating the emotional effects of competition — by keeping score during every practice session. You add to the pressure of competition by starting with reasonable benchmarks and gradually increasing them to a level

just beyond your comfort zone for subsequent practice sessions. You are striving for a perfect score, not perfect mechanics.

The immortal coach Vince Lombardi said, "Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect." Practice merely programs habitual behaviors. Coach Lombardi emphasized an important and often overlooked point — that diligently practicing carelessly will yield bad mental habits that will become constant barriers to peak performances.

DELIBERATE PRACTICE

The thing that sets the truly great shooters apart from exceptionally good shooters is deliberate practice. Ericsson and Pool described deliberate practice as "informed" purposeful practice. Even seemingly gifted or innately talented young performers must exercise deliberate practice for a decade or more to achieve greatness.

"Don't practice until you get it right. Practice until you can't get it wrong" is a maxim that inhabits the soul of every great performer. Iconic martial artist Bruce Lee captured the essence of deliberate practice when he said, "I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times."

In their book, *Evidence-Based Practice in Athletic Training*, authors Scot Raab and Deborah Craig defined "informed practice" as a systematic method of reviewing best evidence for the sport, and combining it with the coach's experience and expertise, to help the athlete master the skills necessary to achieve



▲ Ultimately, the goal of practice is to create good habits. This way, good things happen automatically.

peak performances. Deliberate practice involves two essential criteria:

- **Established Skill** – The activity the student intends to master must be an established skill in a well-developed field with many experienced practitioners. Furthermore, some of these experienced practitioners must be great performers.
- **Experienced Teacher** – A qualified teacher/coach is an experienced practitioner who can provide essential feedback and prescribe appropriate practice activities that are necessary to promote motivation and facilitate continuous improvement in the student.

These criteria for deliberate practice remind me of the way our Olympic training facilities are structured for the various sports. The young athletes are literally sequestered in these

training camps with the best equipment, the most experienced coaches, and the latest technology. These dedicated athletes train and practice to the limits of human endurance. Most importantly, the athletes benefit from continuous expert feedback during and after every practice session. One truly exceptional product of the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, is my friend Kim Rhode.

INTENTIONALLY GUIDED PRACTICE

No athlete personifies intentionally guided practice more than Kim. I have watched her grow from an adolescent clay target shooter who won a World Skeet Championship at age 13 to one of the world's greatest performers in a sport that requires near perfection in competition. Since making the U.S. National Team as a teenager, Kim has won 14 National Championship gold medals, 41 medals in international competition, and six Olympic medals in six consecutive Olympic games as of 2019.

Kim is the only Olympian to qualify and compete in all three shotgun disciplines: International Double Trap, International Skeet, and International Bunker Trap. When discussing her incomparable shooting legacy, Kim humbly acknowledged, "We don't get there on our own. It takes a lot of support from a lot of people to achieve your dream, whatever it may be." That is true, but shooting 500 to 1,000 targets a day also helps!

Whereas deliberate practice requires effort and attention from the athlete, it also involves activities selected by an experienced coach or teacher to facilitate guided learning. Ericsson and Pool emphasized that deliberate practice must be guided by a knowledgeable and experienced teacher who provides an appropriate template for the student to follow in order to achieve his or her specific goals.

MANAGE YOUR THINKING

The conscious mind is always thinking. However, as I emphasized in *A Method for the Magic*, how you



▲ Your conscious mind is always thinking, analyzing mistakes and trying to correct them. This is good in training, but you must learn to let the conscious mind be less involved in practice and to let your unconscious mind take over during competition.

think affects the way you shoot clay targets. The conscious mind is actively involved in analyzing mistakes and suggesting corrective actions. It requires mental discipline to quiet the conscious mind so the unconscious mind can achieve a peak performance during competition. The conscious mind must be dominant during training, less involved during practice, and submissive to the unconscious mind during competition.

I have referred to this process as “flipping the switch” to convert from left-brain (analytical) thinking to a right-brain (reflexive) non-thinking. Cowen, Nesti and Cheetham described this switching process as achieving a dynamic balance between an athlete’s conscious and unconscious minds based upon the context of the task.

Starks, Deakin, Allard, Hodges and Hayes demonstrated a strong correlation between the relevance of the practice activity and the concentration level of the student. They concluded that the more relevant the practice drills were to actual competition, the greater the ability of the athlete to concentrate on the task

and manage this dynamic balance in thinking.

Larry Oxford is an annual participant in one of my Shima Shooting ExperienceSM sessions. These are intensive three-day shooting development programs limited to four or five serious shooters. Larry is truly a dedicated student of the game of skeet and had been practicing by shooting regular rounds every week. After his first SSE, Larry began to shoot training drills regularly.

The majority of time spent during a Shima Shooting ExperienceSM session involves shooting various drills to enhance the mechanical, visual and mental elements of shooting clay targets. The drills expose bad shooting habits and promote the programming of good habits in accordance with the shooter’s style. Therefore, each shooter leaves San Antonio with an appropriate personal shooting development program that suits his or her shooting style and enables him or her to practice with purpose, develop better shooting habits, and achieve new “personal bests” in the months ahead.

After a few months of shooting his practice drills almost exclusively, Larry noted that his scores in competition improved because he “thinks differently” about the next target. His new thoughts during competition are related to a specific practice drill — this is just like an incomer drill, or this one is just like an outgoer drill. Instead of making the practice drills relevant to competition, Larry reversed the approach to make the competition targets relevant to his practice drills. **CTN**

► John Shima is a five-time World Skeet Champion. To view previous articles or order John’s books, go to www.johnshima.com.