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Practice makes perfect sense in all sport

THE concept of talent hotbeds is one of the most fascinating in sport. How does the tiny island of Jamaica win every short sprint at the Olympic Games, while Kenya and Ethiopia share the distance medals?

What explains New Zealand's 80% success rate in rugby, and why do South Korean women golfers occupy five of the world's top 10 positions?

Our desire to simplify complex phenomena polarises the answers to these questions into either genetics or training.

That is, the advantage is first said to be one or the other. Then, once genes are ruled out by a lack of evidence, the remaining explanation is that it is exclusively cultural/training.

The idea that genetics and training could complement one another probably doesn't sell too many books, and so most theories have divided the theories, and emerged with a simplistically incomplete explanation.

Examples include Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, Matthew Syed's *Bounce* and Rasmus Ankersen's *Goldmine Effect*.

There is unquestionably value



DOCTOR KNOW
ROSS TUCKER

in the idea that creating culture and optimising practice drives success. Learning from and imitating South Korea's golf programme, or New Zealand's rugby success, could be a source of great improvement.

However, it is unhelpful to polarise complex debates and offer extreme simplicity as a solution, because it drives potentially detrimental allocations of resources and policies around how we coach and manage participation and competition in sport, particularly in children.

No scientist or coach has ever argued entirely for genes at the expense of practice. The very existence of the coaching profession shows that practice is highly valued, and professional sport is built around training for

improvement. Practice drives progress, without question, but is also economically wasteful.

"Practice makes perfect" requires the realisation that the culture of training must be applied to the right people.

An obvious example is basketball — unless you are taller than 180cm, you have a slim chance of getting on the court, let alone standing tall in a world of literal giants. Height has strong genetic influences, but with astonishing complexity — it takes almost 300 000 different genetic variations to account for height. How many more are needed for complex physiology of performance? Unfortunately, science's "failures" to find "performance genes" have led people to erroneously conclude that they don't exist.

A current theory is that it's not a question of whether unique genes or groups of genes for performance exist. Those searching for speed genes in Jamaicans or endurance genes in Kenyans are destined to fail.

Rather, I would suggest that there are simply more people in these countries who have the

optimal combination of genes for specific sporting success. The result is that when they are exposed to good coaching and competition systems, potential emerges in greater numbers.

Jamaica now has a healthy sporting system and abundant coaching expertise that ensures that future Usain Bolts don't slip through the cracks, precisely because many decades ago, Usain Bolt's predecessors pointed to an untapped "gold mine".

The analogy is that you don't invest in gold mining just anywhere, but rather where you find nuggets, on the assumption that a little digging will find more.

In some sports, of course, genetics matter less, and training matters more. Golf, for instance, is a sport where exhaustive practice and attention to technical proficiency is crucial. It's no coincidence that South Korean women dominate archery and shooting along with golf — the same practice principles apply. However, the lesson for everyone is to discover your aptitude, then invest in practice to perfect it. Training is, after all, the realisation of genetic potential.



MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB: Scot Andy Murray clammers down from the stands after becoming the UK's first men's Wimbledon champion in 77 years. Now he has another mountain to climb — to hold his US Open title. Picture: JULIAN FINNEY/GETTY IMAGES

New frontier for Murray

SIMON BRIGGS

ON FRIDAY night, a banquetting suite at the Waldorf Astoria played host to what was arguably the greatest assembly of tennis talent ever assembled in one room.

No fewer than 19 world No 1s, past and present, turned up, and the older men made a point of congratulating the three youngest — Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic — on representing their sport so well. Where was Andy Murray in all this hoopla, which was convened to mark the 40th anniversary of the ATP rankings system? Not invited, and not mentioned.

His highest position, remember, is only No 2 — and that rather epitomises his low-key week so far. Murray may be coming back to New York as the reigning US Open champion, but what with Rafael Nadal's latest resurgence, Roger Federer's

He's starting as a defending Grand Slam champ for first time

alarming slump and even the publication of Novak Djokovic's eccentric recipe book, there has been surprisingly little fuss around him in the build-up.

Murray will feel pressure when he walks out to face Michael Llodra in the opening round today, of course.

"I would expect to be very nervous," he admitted yesterday, "because it is a new experience for me. I have never come into a Slam as defending champion so it's different, and, when you haven't experienced something before, it makes you a bit uneasy or uncertain."

On his return to Arthur Ashe Stadium just over a week ago, Murray found his mind flashing back to that stormy night when the wind stirred his frizzy hair up into a white man's afro, but

his control of the ball never wavered.

"It was good to come here and go back out onto the centre court for the first time because last year I was so relieved at the end that I don't feel like I really enjoyed it as much as I should have done," he said.

"It was frantic and I wasn't really thinking enough. So coming back here was really nice."

On the intervening days, Murray has been back on Ashe every day, training with his usual intensity. On Friday, he played a ferocious practice set against Nadal, during which both men berated themselves angrily for errors and chased down every ball like over-excited Labradors.

As Nadal's publicist put it afterwards:

"Practise like you play: that

has always been Rafa's policy."

At least Murray has a relatively kind route to the last eight, with Juan Mónaco, a grinding Argentinian clay-courtier, and Nicolás Pietrangeli, a Spaniard with a flowing backhand but a shortage of conviction, as the minor seeds in his section of the draw.

The threat is likely to come from the other two members of the new tennis triangle. Particularly if he has to play them back-to-back over the tournament's last three days.

Still, at least he has one trick up his sleeve.

Should a match on Ashe be slipping away from him, he can always repair to the same bathroom where he gathered himself last year, with the final about to enter its deciding set.

"No, I haven't been back yet," Murray grinned. "But if I am a couple of sets down, you might see me head in there." — © The Daily Telegraph, London