

Life is Not a Game of Perfect: Finding Your Real Talent and Making It Work for You

By Dr. Bob Rotella

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Most people think that talent is genetically determined. The truth about human performance is far more encouraging, Bob Rotella believes that anyone can develop real talent - a combination of character, attitude, and devotion, which make greatness possible.

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Editorial Review

Review

Tom Scott Co-President, Nantucket Nectars We all have the ability to succeed -- we're born with it. Too often, that ability is hidden behind fear and misplaced reliance on traditional theories and paths. Doctor Bob teaches us how to re-find that ability and how to use it. I apply it to work, to sports -- to all aspects of life. --
Review

About the Author

Bob Rotella was the Director of Sports Psychology for twenty years at the University of Virginia, where his reputation grew as the person champions talked to about the mental aspects of their game. His client list includes Hall of Fame golfers like Pat Bradley, Tom Kite, and Nick Price as well as stars of the present, such as Darren Clarke, Keegan Bradley, Pdraig Harrington, Graeme McDowell, Mark Wilson, and Rory Mcllroy. A writer for and consultant to *Golf Digest*, he lives in Virginia with his wife, Darlene.

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Chapter One: Brilliance of a Different Sort

Most of us think we know what talent is.

We hear a soprano hit and hold a clear, high C and we think she's talented. We see a basketball player soar above the defense, turn in the air, and jam the ball through the hoop for two points. We think he's talented. We see a skinny kid in the front row of a math class who effortlessly glides through calculus and scores an 800 on the SAT test. We think he's talented.

Talent, we think, is something granted or withheld by fate. It's in our genes or it's not in our genes. It's speed and leaping ability. It's a lyrical voice. It's a facile mastery of calculus. And we think that talent, defined in this way, by and large determines an individual's ability to succeed.

Television and the press reinforce this notion. They glorify the precocious, natural achievers and make it seem as if they live on a mountaintop high above the valley in which the rest of the world plods along.

I don't dispute that the soprano, the math whiz, and the slam-dunk artist have talent as talent is conventionally defined.

But in twenty-five years as a psychologist, working with people who want to succeed in fields ranging from golf to finance, I've learned that this conventional talent, while important and helpful, is not sufficient to make an individual successful. In many cases, it's not even necessary. I've learned that other abilities and qualities, traits of character less easily observed than physical gifts or test scores, do lead to success. These traits are brilliance of a different sort. They comprise what I call real talent.

This book is about real talent. It's a book of good news, because unlike the talent to hit high C or execute the tomahawk slam, real talent doesn't depend on your genes. *Real talent is something anyone can develop.*

Take the case of a friend of mine, Bob Sherman. Bob grew up in the 1950s in Durand, Michigan, a small

town near Lansing and Flint. He was the quintessential small-town sports star. He quarterbacked the football team. He ran the hurdles on the track team. He excelled in baseball. In fact, he attracted a bonus offer from the Boston Red Sox organization. In an athletic sense, he seemed well endowed with conventional talent.

But his parents had not been able to go to college, and they were determined that Bob would. "They saw a college degree as a way of getting out of the blue-collar world, of getting a high-class job," Bob recalls.

So he turned down the Red Sox, temporarily, and chose to go to the University of Iowa on a football scholarship. Iowa, unlike some of the other schools that recruited him, did not insist that he forgo baseball in favor of spring football practice. But Iowa was, in those days, a football powerhouse, and an interesting thing happened to Bob when he got there. He found out that he was no longer considered supremely talented in the conventional sense of the word.

He was still as fast and as agile as he had been at home in Durand. But there were faster, more agile athletes at Iowa. And a lot of them were bigger than Bob was. In the context of big-time college athletics, Bob recalls, "I wasn't very gifted. I didn't have great ability."

He had to adjust. He didn't lose faith in his physical gifts. He still believed in them. But he understood that they were no longer sufficient. If he was going to succeed at Iowa, he had to discover his real talent.

And he did. He started with some of the qualities of character his parents had instilled in him. They had always told him the important thing was doing his best. They had helped him to learn that there is no shame in failure if you fail after giving everything you have. "I decided," Bob remembers, "that I might get beat out, but no one would outwork me."

So he threw himself into football competition. His coaches suggested that if he wanted to play, he would have to give up being a quarterback and learn to play defense. He did that. He spent a lot of time on the bench, but he became a starter at halfback in his senior year. He wasn't a star for Iowa, but he was a very solid player. And he ran the hurdles and played baseball for the Hawkeyes, still planning a professional baseball career.

More important, the attitude he had to develop to keep playing football manifested itself in his studies. Bob was determined to get his degree before his football scholarship ran out. Not many star athletes at Iowa felt that way. They fell prey to the notion that floats about in our society that talent determines everything. They had lots of fans and coaches telling them how talented they were, so they felt no need for discipline or hard work in their studies. Bob Sherman, on the other hand, perceived himself as someone with limited gifts who would have to work hard to get what he wanted. And he did. He majored in biological science with a psychology minor, thinking that he might coach when he finished school and professional baseball. He had to manage his time very carefully to compete in three sports and keep his grades up. In his fraternity, among his peers, he developed a reputation as a bit of a grind. Some people teased him because he was always either practicing or studying. He ignored them.

In the spring of his senior year at Iowa, two things happened. First, Bob was drafted, in the twelfth round, by the Pittsburgh Steelers. He put away the letter informing him of his selection, thinking that it might someday make an interesting souvenir. He had no intention of playing professional football, at least not until the second thing happened. Bob was with the Iowa baseball team on a road trip in Arizona when he tore the rotator cuff in his throwing arm. This was before the days of either microscopic surgery or the designated hitter. If you tore your rotator cuff you couldn't throw, and if you couldn't throw there was no place for you in baseball. Bob's path to the big leagues was blocked.

He took another look at the Steelers' offer. A twelfth-round draft pick was not exactly a hot commodity. In

fact, the National Football League has since trimmed its draft to fewer than twelve rounds. A twelfth-round pick was not expected to start, or even to make the team. A twelfth-round pick was either a project -- someone the scouts thought had potential that had not been developed in college -- or he was fodder for the taxi squad, someone for the real players to hit during practice.

But Bob, by this time, was used to being perceived as less than supremely talented, and he was beginning to perceive that talent wasn't necessarily what the scouts thought it was. He accepted a bonus from the Steelers in the \$2,000 range and reported to camp. He made the team as a defensive back.

For two more years, Bob threw himself into football. He became a starter for the Steelers. But at the professional level, his body simply wasn't big enough or durable enough. He remembers one time being knocked cold by Hall of Fame receiver Charley Taylor of the Redskins. He remembers playing with hamstring muscles that were black-and-blue from the tearing and pounding they got. It seemed that every time he was about to establish himself in the Steelers' defensive backfield, he got hurt. In 1966, the Steelers let him go in the expansion draft that stocked the Atlanta Falcons. Bob hurt his hamstring again. The Falcons cut him.

Bob decided he had had enough of football. His physical talent had taken him as far as it could. It was time to see where his real talent could take him.

He had developed an interest in stocks and bonds. He liked the financial markets. He also liked the fact that people who worked in them generally derived their income from commissions. In pro football, his income had been limited to his contractual salary. No matter how hard he worked, no matter how successful he was, the contract determined what he would be paid. In the financial world, there was no ceiling on compensation. He wouldn't have to worry about persuading some coach to give him playing time. He wouldn't have to worry about the quality of his team. He and his attitude controlled his destiny. That's true of many jobs in the adult world, and it's one of the reasons people with real talent often blossom in adulthood. They love the opportunity to answer to no one but themselves, to set their own standards and meet them.

Bob wanted to work for Merrill Lynch, then as now the biggest brokerage firm on Wall Street. He didn't have the right contacts. He couldn't get in. He worked for another company for a year, and then he reapplied to Merrill Lynch. This time he was accepted. He started in Merrill Lynch's Detroit office in 1967.

Starting as a financial consultant without a lot of rich friends wasn't easy. Bob culled newspapers, magazines, anything he could find to generate lists of prospects, people who might have some money to invest. Then he called on them. He worked three or four nights per week and most Saturdays. He drove wherever he had to drive to meet with someone willing to listen to his presentation on stocks and mutual funds.

His failure rate was high but not atypical. In his early days, perhaps one call in twenty-five generated a sale.

What separated Bob from most of the beginning brokers was his attitude, which was part of his real talent. He didn't see himself as a natural salesman, but he knew the value of perseverance. He would persevere when others would not. He would devote himself to thinking of ways to succeed rather than thinking of things that rationalized failure.

As a result of that attitude, he never felt sorry for himself when a prospect said no. He chose to see such calls as small successes. "It was knocking a bad prospect off my list. That brought me one step closer to the good prospect," he recalls.

The difference between successful and unsuccessful salespeople, he found, is that "most people will starve

before they'll put themselves in a position to be told no. To succeed in this business, you have to have the courage to put yourself in a position where you can fail."

As we'll see, that attitude about failure is one of the characteristics of real talent.

Bob rose in the company and today he is in charge of Merrill Lynch's operations in the eastern region of the United States. That's where I've come to know him, because I frequently consult with Merrill Lynch's management on ways to find and develop the kind of talent Bob displayed as a young broker -- real talent.

It's not easy, because real talent is difficult to measure. While you have to be reasonably intelligent to be a successful financial consultant, Bob has found that college grades and IQ scores are not a good predictor of success. "The world is full of 4.0s who can't succeed in business," he says.

Interestingly, he's also found that success in athletics is also a poor predictor. The reason, he believes, is that the best athletes get the wrong message about talent. "A lot of them had so much physical ability that success in athletics came easily for them. They think it should happen easily in the business world, too. They think the world owes them a living," Bob explains. "The athletes who succeed in business are generally not the ones who were stars on the field. They're the linebackers who were too small and had to work hard just to get on the team. They transfer that ability to make commitments and sacrifices to the business world, and they do well."

But there aren't enough feisty little linebackers knocking on the door at Merrill Lynch or any other company. Bob has found that the best candidates are people who have shown themselves successful in other tasks that require real talent. That reduces the pool pretty quickly. In comparison to ex-jocks and people with perfect scores on the SAT, people with real talent are hard to find.

It used to be, Bob tells me, that only one in five of Merrill Lynch's new hires worked out. The other four, within a few years, had left, either voluntarily or involuntarily. They couldn't meet the sales figures that Merrill Lynch expects of its financial consultants.

In the past few years, after paying great attention to screening and training, Merrill Lynch has improved its ratio of successful new financial consultants to one in four. That seems like a low batting average, but in the world in which Merrill Lynch operates, the world of sophisticated sales, it's quite respectable.

When I speak to new financial consultants at Merrill Lynch, I start out by telling them that I'm blown away by the dimensions of the opportunity that's been laid before them. They're going to work for the Chicago Bulls of their business. The best available research, analysis, and client services are at their disposal. Their company's name alone is going to open doors for them. There is no limit to the amount of money they can earn. Even better, they have the opportunity to do some good in the world by providing clients with financial security. Just ask the people who bought mutual funds from Bob Sherman in the 1960s how well they've done over the past thirty years.

And yet, three in four will fail to take advantage of that opportunity.

I think that's a reflection of the way our society raises children. Our schools and our families devote enormous attention to cultivating the personal characteristics that we have been told comprise talent. American parents spend lavishly on private schools and tutors and prep courses to improve their children's scores on an endless series of acronymic intelligence tests, from the first IQ to the last GRE. After school and in the summer they devote copious resources to the things that television tells us are the athletic talents -- dunking or dribbling or driving golf balls.

But I know of few if any school programs that teach and develop the characteristics of real talent. If the typical school pays any attention at all to personal strength of character, it wastes its time on superficial efforts to assure that each child has high self-esteem. Regardless of how the children perform, it tells them that they're great, they're marvelous, they're talented. Kids see through this. It does no good.

In the end, our system spews out millions of graduates who become the three out of four who fail to grasp the opportunity they're afforded by companies like Merrill Lynch. Because ours is a wealthy society, they don't starve. For the most part, they find niches where mediocrity is tolerated. They go on to have careers of no particular distinction. They retire with a vague sense of dissatisfaction and bitterness. They keep the psychiatrists and the makers of Prozac in business.

I see this as a terrible loss. I know that this society could be unimaginably more productive and a great deal happier if people knew the truth about talent and acted on it.

And I see myself as very fortunate, because I grew up in a home and in a town and at a time in which real talent was appreciated and cultivated.

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Users Review

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