

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Practice Does *Not* Make Perfect

by Dr. Mike Armour

Bobby Knight, the legendary basketball coach, is not always a man worthy of emulation, in my judgment. At times his antics and behavior have gone too far. But he does know his game. And he also knows a thing or two about winning attitudes.

And on that subject, here is one of his more insightful comments: "The will to succeed is important, "he notes," but what's more important is the will to prepare." To which we might add this corollary: "Your will to succeed never exceeds the depth of your will to prepare."

Perfect Practice

Success most commonly comes from exacting preparation. Nothing else – not even natural talent – will substitute for it. In every field of endeavor the "great ones" make achievement seem effortless, but only because they put such effort into preparation.

We've all heard the adage, "Practice makes perfect." My late colleague Dr. Dan Mitchell used to quote that proverb, only to amend it. "Practice doesn't make perfect," he would say. "*Perfect* practice makes perfect."

His comment always took me back to an old upright grand piano, sitting just off the living room in my childhood home. My great grandmother had won the piano in a music competition in the late 19th century. It was a rather expensive instrument in its day, so she must have been a gifted musician to win such a prize.

I first sat down at this family heirloom when I was about ten years old, right after it moved into our house. I dreamed of playing it even better than my great grandmother. I had the will to succeed. And not only that. In Bobby Knight's words, I had the will to prepare. I never resented spending hours and hours at the keyboard.

But there was a major flaw in my approach. Our family was too poor to afford music lessons. So I borrowed some second-hand music books and started figuring things out for myself. Unfortunately, I didn't always "figure things out" properly. I taught myself a lot of sloppy techniques. And in time my poor technique put a limit on how far I could progress.

The limitations weren't apparent at first, because in high school I was part of a successful six piece band. But our music was relatively simple, easy to play. Only when I tried my hand at more demanding music did poor technique catch up with me. My fingers just weren't up to the task.

Envisioning Perfect Preparation

I had spent far more than the requisite hours in practice. If practice alone makes perfect, I should have been nearing perfection. But my practice wasn't perfect practice, to use Dan's phrase. As a result, I peaked as a musician far below what I dreamed of.

So let me modify Knight's adage slightly. It's not just the will to succeed that's important. Nor even the will to prepare. It's the will to prepare perfectly.

Whatever the endeavor, most of us have a pretty good idea of what a perfect performance looks like. But what does perfect preparation look like? Can you picture that clearly? Motivational texts frequently outline methods for envisioning stellar performance. Equally vital is envisioning stellar preparation. Without that distinct vision, we easily settle for "less-than-perfect" preparation.

That's because practice and preparation are often rather boring. We can easily think of dozens of things we would rather be doing. The tendency then is to take short cuts. To put in minimum prep time. Or perhaps we give preparation its due time, but not our best effort. Consistent, superior performance, however, never yields to these temptations.

As a young ambitious singer, still developing his now-famous style, Frank Sinatra made a painful self-assessment. His breath support was altogether inadequate for the style of music he wanted to sing. So he developed a daily regimen of working out at a local swimming pool, pushing himself to swim as far as he could under water. Day after day, month after month, he kept stretching his distance, learning to expand his lung capacity and to optimize his breath control.

As he was swimming those endless laps, he no doubt would have preferred to be out with friends. Or singing to an audience. After all, performing was his dream. Not practice. But he cherished his dream so much that he was willing to pay the price of boredom, tedium, and monotony to make perfect preparation.

Right now you're probably setting goals for 2006. Or perhaps dusting off unfinished goals from years past. Ideally at least some of your goals will call on you or your team to stretch. It's in stretch goals where "perfect preparation" becomes vital.

In your case preparation may not be so much about practice and rehearsal, but more about exhaustive research, extraordinary planning, or painstaking assessment. For many of us those activities can be about as appealing as hours running scales on a keyboard.

But if the goals really matter to you, take no shortcuts in your preparation. Get a clear vision of what perfect preparation would look like. The time you would give to it. The effort. Then settle for nothing less.

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