

The
LITTLE BOOK
of
TALENT

52

TIPS *for* IMPROVING YOUR SKILLS

Daniel Coyle



BANTAM BOOKS | NEW YORK

The Little Book of Talent is a work of nonfiction.
Some names and identifying details have been changed.

Copyright © 2012 by Daniel Coyle
All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Bantam Books,
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group,
a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Bantam Books and the rooster colophon are
registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Coyle, Daniel.
The little book of talent : 52 tips for improving skills / Daniel Coyle.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-345-53025-7

eBook ISBN 978-0-345-53669-3

I. Ability. I. Title.

BF431.C685 2012

153.9—dc23

2012001646

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

www.bantamdell.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3

FIRST EDITION

Book design by Casey Hampton

Illustrations by Mike Rohde

INTRODUCTION

The Story of the Little Book

A few years back, on assignment for a magazine, I began visiting talent hotbeds: tiny places that produce large numbers of world-class performers in sports, art, music, business, math, and other disciplines. Places such as:

- A ramshackle Moscow tennis club that had, over the previous three years, produced more Top 20 women players than the entire United States.
- A humble Adirondacks music camp where students accomplish one year's worth of progress in seven weeks.
- A San Mateo, California, inner-city charter school that, in four years, transformed a student population perennially ranked at the bottom of

INTRODUCTION

state math scores into one that scored in the ninety-sixth percentile.

- A Dallas vocal studio that has, over the past decade, developed millions of dollars' worth of pop-music talent.
- A ski academy in Vermont with an enrollment of a hundred that has produced fifty Olympic skiers over the past forty years.

My research also took me to a different sort of hotbed: the laboratories and research centers around the country investigating the new science of talent development. For centuries, people have instinctively assumed that talent is largely innate, a gift given out at birth. But now, thanks to the work of a wide-ranging team of scientists, including Dr. K. Anders Ericsson, Dr. Douglas Fields, and Dr. Robert Bjork, the old beliefs about talent are being overturned. In their place, a new view is being established, one in which talent is determined far less by our genes and far more by our actions: specifically, the combination of intensive practice and motivation that produces brain growth.* My project evolved into a book called *The Talent Code*, which was about how the hot-

* Why the brain? Because developing talent is all about growing the brain. "Muscle memory" doesn't really exist, because our muscles simply do what our brains tell them to do. Thus, the new science can be summed up as follows: You want to develop your talent? Build a better brain through intensive practice.

INTRODUCTION

beds succeed by aligning themselves with the brain's natural mechanisms for acquiring skill.

Along the way, however, the journey had an unexpected side effect. Besides being a journalist, I happen to be the father of four, a volunteer baseball coach, and the husband of a hockey-playing wife. As a family, we struggled daily with the usual questions and anxieties that revolve around the process of acquiring and developing skills. How do we help our daughter learn her multiplication tables? How do we tell a genuine talent from a momentary interest? What's the best way to spark motivation? How do we encourage improvement without becoming psycho parents or creating stressed, unhappy kids? As it turned out, visiting these remarkable places was not just a chance for me to be a journalist. It was also a chance to become a better coach and a better dad.

It started when I visited my first talent hotbed, the Spartak Tennis Club in Moscow. On my first morning there, I walked in to see a line of players swinging their racquets in slow motion, without the ball, as a teacher made small, precise adjustments to their form. I noticed the way the teachers routinely mixed age groups. I noticed the riveted, laserlike looks in the younger players' eyes as they watched the older stars, as if they were burning images of perfect forehands and backhands onto their brains. In my brain, a thought began to take shape.

INTRODUCTION

I could really use this stuff back home.

From that point on, whenever I spotted a nugget of advice or a potentially useful method, I jotted it in my notebook and marked the page with an electric-pink Post-it. I scribbled down tips like *Always exaggerate new moves*; *Shrink the practice space*; and (my personal favorite) *Take lots of naps*. Over the course of the year, a forest of pink grew along the edges of my notebook.

The advice turned out to work well—quite well, judging by the swift, steady progress of my kids’ violin and piano playing, my wife’s hockey skills, and the win-loss record of the Little League team I coached (10-3; the all-star team I coached, which had historically done poorly, nearly advanced to regionals). After *The Talent Code* was published, I began hearing from groups that were using the principles of the book to create talent-development programs of their own—a charter school in Maine, a nursing program in Minnesota, a golf academy in Florida, an SAT-prep course in California, a Division I college basketball team, a software company, military special-ops training organizations, and several professional sports teams. I kept traveling, visiting more talent hotbeds, talking to more master teachers, and adding more pink Post-its. At some point I realized that I needed to organize all this advice and put it in one place.

This book is that place.

What follows is a collection of simple, practical tips

INTRODUCTION

for improving skills, taken directly from the hotbeds I visited and the scientists who research them. The advice is field-tested, scientifically sound, and, most important, concise. Because when it comes down to it, we're all navigating busy, complex lives. Parent or teacher, kid or coach, artist or entrepreneur, we all want to make the most of our time and energy. When it comes to developing our talents, we could use an owner's manual, something to say *Do this, not that*. We could use a master coach that tucks in our pocket. We could use a little book.

How to Use This Book

Let's start with the basics:

1. We all possess talents.
2. We're unsure how to develop those talents to their full potential.

For most of us, the problem revolves around one word: "how." How do we recognize talents in ourselves and in those near us? How do we nurture talent in its early stages? How do we gain the most progress in the least time? How do we choose between different strategies, teachers, and methods?

This book is built on the idea that the best way to develop your talents is to follow the proven techniques of

INTRODUCTION

the talent hotbeds. The tips I've collected fall into three natural categories, which form the sections of this book:

- 1) *Getting Started*: ideas for igniting motivation and creating a blueprint for the skills you want to build.
- 2) *Improving Skills*: methods and techniques for making the most progress in the least time.
- 3) *Sustaining Progress*: strategies for overcoming plateaus, keeping motivational fires lit, and building habits for long-term success.

Each section consists of a series of tips. The tips are brief—not because they're oversimplified, but because simplicity is the point. While the underlying neuroscience is fascinating and complex, it all adds up to the basic truth: *Small actions, repeated over time, transform us*. As the master vocal coach Linda Septien put it, “This ain't magic, and it ain't rocket science. It's about working hard, and working smart.”

It's also about working in a way that fits our lives. That's why this book is made to be carried—tucked into a pocket, an instrument case, or a sports bag. It's also why it contains blank pages for your notes.*

Whatever talent you set out to build, from golfing to

* If you'd like to offer a comment or suggest a new tip to others, go to thetalentcode.com.



INTRODUCTION

learning a new language to playing guitar to managing a startup, be assured of one thing: You are born with the machinery to transform beginners' clumsiness into fast, fluent action. That machinery is not controlled by genes, it's controlled by you. Each day, each practice session, is a step toward a different future. This is a hopeful idea, and the most hopeful thing about it is that it is a fact.



GETTING STARTED

Stare, Steal, and
Be Willing to Be Stupid

We are often taught that talent begins with genetic gifts—that the talented are able to effortlessly perform feats the rest of us can only dream about. This is false. Talent begins with brief, powerful encounters that spark motivation by linking your identity to a high-performing person or group. This is called ignition, and it consists of a tiny, world-shifting thought lighting up your unconscious mind: *I could be them.*

This first section is about creating the ignition moment, and about channeling its energy in the most constructive way. The tips cover several areas—mind-set, how to design your practice for the skills you want to build, and how to improve your learning by stealing effectively from top performers—but they share the same goal: to create the spark, and to use the fuel for deep practice.



TIP #1

STARE AT WHO YOU WANT TO BECOME

If you were to visit a dozen talent hotbeds tomorrow, you would be struck by how much time the learners spend observing top performers. When I say “observing,” I’m not talking about passively watching. I’m talking about staring—the kind of raw, unblinking, intensely absorbed gazes you see in hungry cats or newborn babies.

We each live with a “windshield” of people in front of us; one of the keys to igniting your motivation is to fill your windshield with vivid images of your future self, and to stare at them every day. Studies show that even a brief connection with a role model can vastly increase unconscious motivation. For example, being told that you share a birthday with a mathematician can improve the amount of effort you’re willing to put into difficult math tasks by 62 percent.

Many talent hotbeds are fueled by the windshield

phenomenon. In 1997, there were no South Korean golfers on the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Tour. Today there are more than forty, winning one-third of all events. What happened? One golfer succeeded (Se Ri Pak, who won two major tournaments in 1998), and, through her, hundreds of South Korean girls were ignited by a new vision of their future selves. As the South Korean golfer Christina Kim put it, “You say to yourself, ‘If she can do it, why can’t I?’”

Windshields apply equally well to adults. The 5th Special Forces Group of the Green Berets recently started a leadership-training program in which soldiers spent several weeks in the executive offices of General Electric. The soldiers went to the office each morning and accompanied the execs throughout their workday, with no responsibilities other than to simply observe. And when the soldiers returned to their unit, the commanders noticed a significant boost in performance, communication, and leadership. “It was definitely a success,” said Lieutenant Colonel Dean Franks, the 5th Group’s battalion commander. “We’re planning to do a lot more of this in the future.”

Think of your windshield as an energy source for your brain. Use pictures (the walls of many talent hotbeds are cluttered with photos and posters of their stars) or, better, video. One idea: Bookmark a few YouTube videos, and watch them before you practice, or at night before you go to bed.